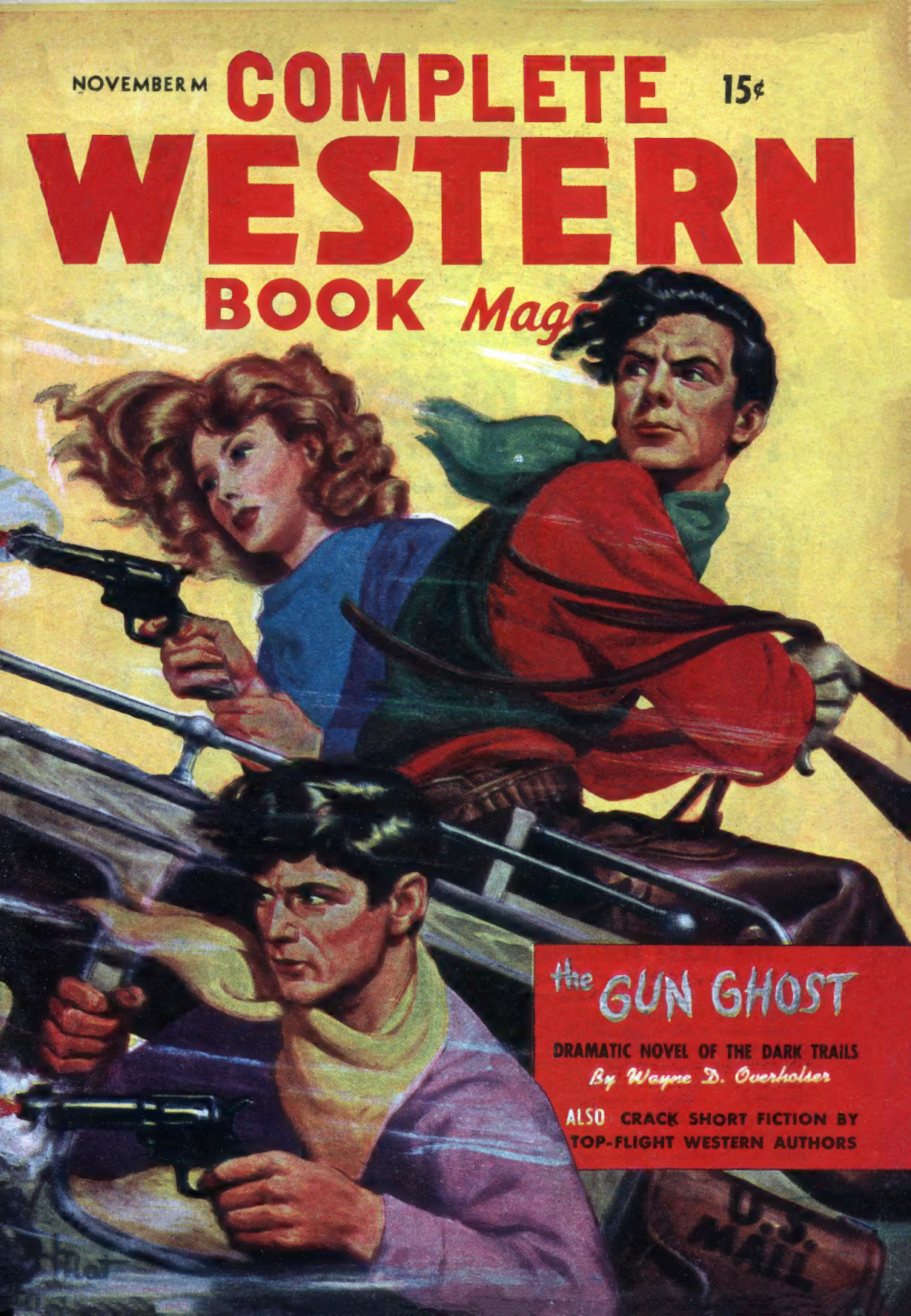
NOVEMBER M
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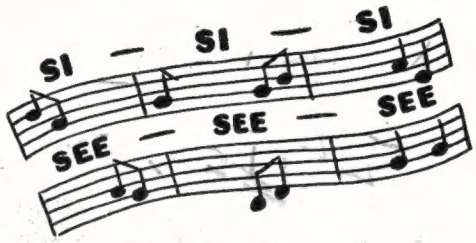
WESTERN
BOOK Mag
the GUN GHOST
DRAMATIC NOVEL OF THE DARK TRAILS
By Wayne D. Overholser
ALSO CRACK SHORT FICTION BY
TOP-FLIGHT WESTERN AUTHORS

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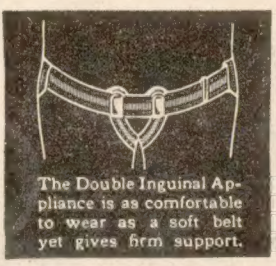

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COMPLETE WESTERN BOOK Magazine

Vol. 16. No. 3 — A RED CIRCLE MAGAZINE — November, 1946

ROBERT O. ERISMAN
Editor

★ ★ 2 SMASH FEATURE-LENGTH NOVELS ★ ★

BEWARE THE HIRED-HOLSTER BRIGADE!
.....by Norman A. Fox 8

He had bullets in his gun-belt and a .45 in his hand, and mebbeso the range-barons of this raw red Montana mountain country could bushwhack Kirk Bellane's line crews and smash his supply freighters on the frontier trails, but they'd never stop the kid himself—no, not so long as he could trigger a Colt, not so long as he could throw hot lead!

THE GUN GHOST...by Wayne D. Overholser 44

Tragedy was stalking this trail town all right, and Death had staked out a claim on every neighboring spread, but Dusty Miles still vowed that you could blast a phantom killer like any other back-shooting critter—with bullets!

★ ★ 2 DRAMATIC RANGE-WAR NOVELETS ★ ★

DIM-TRAIL DESTINY.....by Lee Monroe 67

A gunman had nothing to live for, but he yearned for something just like any other human being. He knew that finally his guns would not be fast enough and before he died he wanted somehow to give his life some meaning . . .

THE KID THEY CALLED A KILLER.....
.....by Hascal Giles 83

This was war, but he'd be tying his own hangnoose if he matched hot lead here with more hot lead, for Van Falin already had a range-rep of killing every gent he met!

★ ★ 2 CRACK SHORT STORIES ★ ★

"MY LINE FENCE IS A LONG RIFLE!".....
.....by Hapsburg Liebe 27

Mebbeso the Moreland Big M was the biggest cow spread in the country, but it still looked like free range to the tall graybeard and he was staking his claim with a long gun line fence!

THE BOOMTOWN THAT BUILT A MAN.....
.....by David X. Manners 35

No green kid would cut in on Tularosa's free-flowing gold, Liam Ogelthorpe sized—only a hardcase would ride this boomtown wave, a seasoned tinhorn, a dim-trail denizen, a Colt-wise lead-merchant!

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NOVEMBER, 1946—ISSUE

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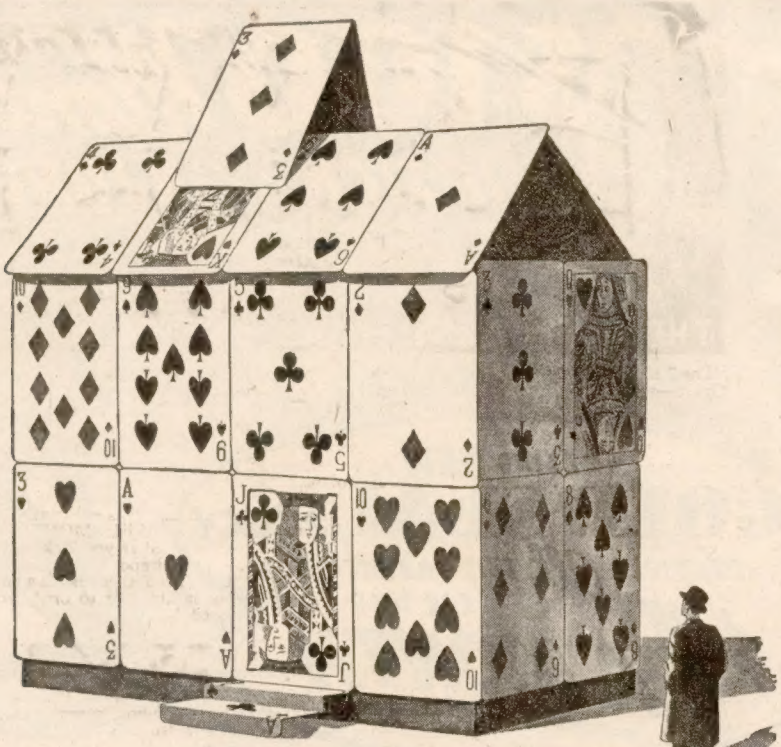

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BEWARE THE HIRED-

CHAPTER I

Spring Trap

HE had climbed this far, and he could climb no farther. He had a nest of rocks around him, sturdy shelter against the bullets that sang from below, but he had a cliff at his back, and though it was only a dozen feet high, it was sheer and unscalable. He had bullets in the belt around his lean middle, and he had his forty-five in his hand. But he'd spend those bullets, one by one, and when they were gone, those half-dozen men who'd penned him here would rush him, and there'd be nowhere to run. That was the size of the situation.

It drew Kirk Bellane's lips into a thin line, just thinking about it. From where

HOLSTER BRIGADE! By NORMAN A. FOX

It was every fast gun in the country against him, and Kirk was ready for them!

They'd ambushed his line crews and smashed his supply freighters, but the range-barons of this raw red Montana mountain country would never stop Kirk Bellane—no, not so long as the kid had a bullet-heavy gun-belt, and a .45 hammering in his right hand!

he hunkered he could see the broad sweep of the brush- and boulder-dotted basin below, the precise line of telegraph poles that marched out of the south, and sometimes a flurry of movement as one or another of his besiegers wormed closer. He looked again for his horse, but the mount had bolted at the first beat of gunfire that had sent Bellane sprawling to the ground in pretended

agony. That ruse had gained him the opportunity to get to these rocks, but now he wished he'd stayed in the saddle. The fire was less enticing than the frying pan.

Not that Bellane had given up hope. He'd never geared himself to that kind of thinking. At thirty he'd already put four years of war into a distant past and piled a decade of frontier years on top of them—years when he'd strung telegraph wires from the Pecos to the far reaches of the Pend d'Oreilles. That kind of living inured a man to danger, but it also taught him that his hide wasn't invulnerable. Now Bellane was weighing his chances and finding them slim. But there was always strategy. A Texas man who'd once followed Dixie's ill-fated flag learned things like that.

"Lucas! Hutch Lucas!" he called. "Want to parley?"

The night was coming on fast; thirst and hunger and a westering sun had told Bellane that he'd been here on this hillside for many hours. The crowding darkness could be an advantage or a disadvantage, depending on how the cards fell. His blue eyes squinted, he saw a bush move, though there was no breeze to stir it, and a voice, heavy and guarded, said, "So you know who I am!"

"I was guessing, Lucas," Bellane admitted. "They told me in Fowler-town that you were the curly wolf of these hills. You've cornered poor pickings this time. I've got eight dollars in my pocket. Is my hide worth that?"

"Come down here, bucko, and we'll talk about it," Lucas invited.

BUT Bellane wasn't fooled. "I like it here," he said. "Think this over, man. You're making a mistake. Maybe you figure I'm packing a payroll for that crew of mine that's stringing talking wires up north. But I was heading *south* —to Fowler—when you tried bushwhacking me. This was just a routine trip to our divisional headquarters."

"That makes no never mind," Lucas retorted. "It's *you* we want. And we'll get you, bucko. We can't flank you and climb to that cliff-top above you. Not just now. You've showed yourself too handy with a gun for that. But when the night settles, we'll sew you up fancy. Now *you* do the thinking! You can make it easy for us, or you can make it hard for us. And when we do get our hands on you, we'll remember which way it was."

All this Kirk Bellane heard, and because he was fitting pieces into place, a lot of things were becoming clear that had mystified him in the brief weeks that he'd been in this tangled Montana mountain country. A heady anger riding him, he said, "So it's me you want, eh? And that wouldn't be because Consolidated Telegraph Company has hired you to see that my Mountain Telegraph crew doesn't put a line through to Windigo, up north, in the allotted time? Our wires have been cut, our crews have had to dodge bullets from ambush, and our supply freighters have had trouble on the trails. Now you're out for my hide, because I happen to be Mountain Telegraph's construction chief! Is that it? Well, you can come and get me, mister. And afterwards you can tell your Consolidated bosses that you had to really earn your money!"

"You're calling the tune," Lucas said with a laugh. "We'll do the dancing, bucko!"

Raising his gun, Bellane fired at that bush that had moved so slightly, but even as he triggered he knew that Hutch Lucas, wily veteran of the owlhoot, had anticipated him and eased away. And now the shadows were thronging so thickly that the slight and furtive movements of the men below were effectively

cloaked. Sprinkling bullets at random, Bellane hastily reloaded, then bided his time. Lead chipped rock from his shelter, but the attack was desultory. Time was working for Lucas now—time and the descending darkness. And Lucas knew it.

Yes, very soon now Lucas and his men would be able to spread out with impunity, spread out to maneuver themselves to this cliff above him, if need be, and then the game would be up. But now Kirk Bellane knew that this was no chance attack, no petty scheme to swap a few ounces of lead for the contents of a dead wayfarer's pocket; and because he knew, the fire of his anger turned to a cold and calculated determination to sell himself at a costly price. And with that mood upon him, the rope hissed down from above, coiling about his shoulders.

His first thought was that an outlaw had gotten to the cliff top, and he spun on his heel, hoisting his gun for a shot at whatever showed itself. It was too dark to see, but instinctively he knew there hadn't been time for the enemy to have gained such a strategic position; he'd watched them too closely for that while the light had lasted. And then he heard the cautious, whispering voice that said, "Tie the rope under your armpits." And he almost dropped his gun in astonishment, for the voice had belonged to a girl.

But this, Bellane decided, was no time for questions. He got the rope tied into place, and he felt it tugged gently at first, and then he was hoisted off his feet and was being raised aloft to the cliff top. Now he was clear of those clustering rocks; then like a spider dangling on the end of a thread, and an easy target for those on the slope below, if they suspected what was happening. He blessed the darkness, and, blessing it, heard a gun blast. Lead nicked the face of the cliff and drove rocky splinters into his cheek; another gun spoke, and another; a wild shout went up from below, and then he was to the rim of the cliff, and ready hands were helping to heave him to safety.

There was a girl here, and a man; and the man was black and nearly seven feet tall and proportioned accordingly, a giant Negro. He wore range garb, this black Sampson, and the girl had on a divided riding skirt and a checkered blouse. This much Bellane could see in the first starshine, but he didn't take time to notice more than that. For the three of them were busily scrambling on up the hill, which tilted above the cliff top at a comparatively gentle angle. Once over the hump and out of reach of the guns which were still banging below, they paused breathlessly. The girl said, "Over here! The horses are waiting!"

SHE was small, and she was petite, and Bellane judged that her hair, which was mostly crowded under a sombrero, was golden. Then astonishment was gripping him again, for one of the three horses which stood tied to a forlorn bush on this bald hilltop was his own. The girl smiled and said, "We caught your mount up north. That's what first gave us an inkling that you were hereabouts and likely in trouble. Then we heard the gunfire, and it drew us here. But we had to wait for darkness before we could be of any help."

He wanted to thank her, but he judged that that had better wait. Their need now was to get into saddles and to take advantage of the many minutes Hutch Lucas and his men would need to reach their own horses and maneuver up here. When the three of them were mounted, the giant Negro led the way, and they put a silent mile behind them, heading southward, before the black reined up in the shadow of crowding

timber. The moon was just showing, and it filtered its light through the canopy of leaves to make weird masks for all of them.

The Negro, dismounting, put his ear to the ground, and the girl said, "Riders close by, Domingo?"

"No, Miss Belle," the man replied, and his voice—soft and gentle as a woman's—was as astonishing as the rest of him.

Bellane said then, "I'm beholden to both of you."

The girl measured him with a long look. "I wonder if you'd be willing to prove that, Mr. Bellane?"

His eyebrows arched. "You know my name?"

"And your work. You're putting a telegraph spur up to the new boom camp of Windigo. You've followed a straight course north out of Fowler. But lately you've been veering your line toward the west. Does that mean that you've decided to string wire through the Valley of the Three Sisters?"

He had thought himself immune to any further astonishment, but he was startled into saying, "How in blazes could you know that?"

"I've watched your progress. So has Domingo, here. Your change in plans was obvious. Now I'm asking you not to enter the Valley of the Three Sisters."

"Why?" he demanded bluntly.

"The reason wouldn't be important to you," she said. "It is to me."

"I'm sorry," he countered. "My reasons wouldn't likely be important to you, either. But I've got to go through the Three Sisters."

"I saved your life tonight," she said. "I didn't think I'd have to remind you of that."

"You don't. I've told you I'm beholden to you. I owe you a heap—personally. Mountain Telegraphs line isn't a personal matter, though. That's my job, and I've never balked on my job, not even to save my own skin. Maybe you'll have your chance to collect your debt sometime—from me. You can't collect it from Mountain Telegraph."

She said, "I've asked questions about you in Fowler lately. They told me you were a hard man. Now I know they were telling me truth."

He had met this sort of thing before, this lack of understanding of how it was with a man and his job. He wanted to say something, to try and make it plain that he was not without gratitude, but he'd said all there was to say. He'd been heading for Fowler when he'd been ambushed, and he still had a rendezvous to keep. He jigged his horse, and he said again, "I'm sorry." But they gave him no answer.

Then he had moved away from them, and he was alone in the magic of the moonlight, and all of this was like a dream remembered vividly, but without reality. He looked back once, but he saw only the black chaos of the timber, and he faced forward, wondering if he would meet them again.

It came to him then that he didn't even know her name.

CHAPTER II

Forbidden Valley

FOWLER, like Rip Van Winkle, had slept for twenty years and then been amazed at its own awakening. The desultory trading capital for a vast section of mountain and range, it had suddenly found itself revitalized by a mining boom at Windigo in the hills above. Now a railroad was running into Fowler, a telegraph spur began its march from the town;

and all the men who were drawn by the lure of the riches beyond came first to Fowler to be outfitted. A town that had slept in the sun now teemed with activity; a town that had surrendered to the yesterdays now found itself invaded by the tomorrows.

To this straggling huddle of log and frame buildings, Kirk Bellane came riding at midnight. High-sided freighters rumbled along the narrow street; the saloons roared ceaselessly, and men crowded the boardwalks. Through all this chaos, Bellane moved unerringly, racking his horse before a hastily-erected building whose lamp-lighted window proclaimed it to be the divisional office of Mountain Telegraph Company. When he shouldered into the single room with its pigeon-holed desk, its long counter and its silent telegraph instruments, he found only one man here. But this was the one he sought.

"Howdy, Halloway," Bellane said. "Spelling the night operator, I see. You're learning telegraphy the hard way."

Ranse Halloway was a big man, heavy-handed and heavy-jowled, and addicted to tailored broadcloth and spotless waistcoats. Montana suns had given a high floridness to his ruddy face, but the stamp of Eastern stock exchanges was still upon him. He took Bellane's extended hand affably enough, but there was a note of petulance in Halloway's voice. "What kept you, Bellane?" he demanded.

"A little trouble," Bellane admitted and shaped himself a cigarette. "Hutch Lucas, to be exact. He and his bunch holed me up for a while. I left them when deep dark came."

"Lucas!" Halloway ejaculated. "The outlaw? You mean he attacked you?"

"That was the general idea."

Halloway sucked in a long breath. "How are you coming with the line?"

"Slow," Bellane said. "And that's Lucas' doings, too. Cut wires, rifle bullets, trouble. . . . The same old story"

"Well, tell it to me straight," Halloway demanded. "Are you going to complete on time?"

A telegraph instrument began clacking and Bellane instinctively spelled out the message to himself: C-A-M-P T-E-S-T-I-N-G C-A-M-P T-E-S-T-I-N-G B-R-E-A-K R-E-P-A-I-R-E-D.

Holloway fumbled with the instrument and made an awkward acknowledgement, and Bellane seated himself, nudged back his sombrero and crossed his long legs. "And if we don't complete on time, Halloway?" he said. "Will that break your heart?"

Halloway flushed. "No, it won't break my heart. But it will put a dent in my bank roll. I'm not sure but what there was a sneer in your question, Bellane, and I resent it. I'm no sentimentalist, but I do happen to be a minority stock holder in Mountain Telegraph. I'm concerned enough over my investment that I've come out to this God-forsaken country to keep an eye on things in an unofficial capacity. I've even learned a little about telegraphy; such things help pass the time. But this Montana job of yours is more important than it appears. You know as well as I do that Consolidated Telegraph is going to get the option on all future wire stringing in this part of the country if we don't complete on the date we specified. That will mean a lot of business in the long run—in fact it will mean the difference between whether Mountain or Consolidated stays in business. That's what I'm thinking about!"

IT CAME to Kirk Bellane again, as it had come before, that he and this man were opposites, a pair so diametric-

ally opposed that the sparks inevitably flew when they rubbed against each other. The irony was that they served the same cause, each in a different way; and Bellane said, "Maybe I should beg your pardon. I'm no sentimentalist either. At least I don't think I am. But I'm remembering something a long ways back. I'm remembering myself lying my way into the Confederate army when I wasn't old enough to shave. And I'm remembering coming out of the war to find everything I'd left behind swept away. A lot of Texas boys took to the brasada and became outlaws in those days. Me, I might have too, only Mountain Telegraph let me go to work for them. I've never let the outfit down, and I'm not doing it now. I'll string this wire on time."

"Meaning—?"

"Meaning that I've found a way to outfox Consolidated. They're behind everything that's gone wrong on this job. They've hired Hutch Lucas to bedevil us. I satisfied myself on that point today."

"Bah!" Halloway scoffed. "I've heard you expound that theory before. I know the Consolidated people. They're sharp, shrewd rivals, but they're also men of integrity. They'd never stoop to such means to slow us."

Bellane shrugged. "It makes no never mind. I'm going to shorten the miles and save the minutes by stringing wire through the Valley of the Three Sisters."

"The Valley of the Three Sisters!"

"Look," Bellane said and leaned forward. "So far I've followed the route laid out by Mountain's surveyors. It's a good route, but the maps show a better, shorter one. Through the Three Sisters. I've studied those maps, and I've done some scouting. I tell you, it will mean the difference between success and failure."

Halloway began rapidly pacing the room. "You can't do it!" he said. "Oh, I know I haven't the authority to stop you. The head office thinks you're a little tin god on wheels. But I've studied those maps too, mister. I saw at once that the Three Sisters was a shorter route. But I didn't jump at the notion, Bellane. I checked, investigated. The hills that wall the Three Sisters are Hutch Lucas' hideout. Through the years he's fanned out from the valley, stopping a stage coach now and then, raiding a ranch or holding up some wayfarer. Did you know that?"

"No," Bellane said. "I didn't. But whatever route we take, we'll have Lucas bucking us."

"You've got your teeth into a silly notion that Lucas works for Consolidated," Halloway said. "Can't you see the truth, man? Lucas is obviously set to expand his operations and make a killing with a boom in this section. But he's smart enough to realize that talking wires strung through the hills will make a web to warn posses, to trap him. That's why he's fighting the line tooth and nail. And that's why he'll bedevil us a dozen times as much if we work into the valley."

"Is that all, Halloway?"

"No, that isn't all! There's some sort of eccentric who lives in that valley. He ran Mountain's surveyors out with rifle balls pelting around their heels. That's why they made their survey by the longer route. I got that data straight from the head office—something you didn't bother to do. But I'm telling you that if you tackle the Three Sisters, you'll be asking for trouble that will make you wish you'd taken a route ten times longer."

Bellane came to a stand, jerked his sombrero with an air of finality, and started for the door. At the threshold, he paused. "You can jump on that wire, Halloway, and buzz the head office," he said. "Tell 'em I've gone crazy and

am all set to ruin Mountain Telegraph against all the advice you could dish out. Tell 'em I'm a stubborn, pig-headed Rebel who's out to fight a one-man war. Tell 'em any confounded thing that comes into your head. But while you're at it, tell 'em I'm stringing telegraph wire through the Valley of the Three Sisters!"

Then he was clumping angrily across the boardwalk to his horse. Jerking at the tie-rope, he swung into the saddle. But before he could back his cayuse from the rack, a man came striding down the walk—a lean, black-garbed youngster who carried a doctor's case. This medico, spying Bellane, came to a stop. "Howdy," he said. "How's that rifle wound?"

"Oh, hello Doc," Bellane said. "Rifle wound?"

"Don't tell me you've forgotten the lead I carved out of you a few weeks back!"

"The first bushwhacking my crew got when we started stringing wire out of Fowler," Bellane said. "To tell you the truth, that wound healed so nicely that I *had* forgotten it, King. You're a top-hand sawbones. They could use a man like you back East. What keeps you here, Doc?"

YOUNG Doctor Jonathan King smiled. "There's some nice-smelling mountain air hereabouts," he said. "Walk out to the fringe of this town and have yourself a sniff. Then you'll understand why the cities haven't any appeal."

"There's more to it than that," Bellane said intently.

"Yes, there is," Doc King admitted and was suddenly serious. "I like this country, Bellane. A real town's going to grow out of this boom, and I'd sort of like to grow up with it. Look, we've got a railroad coming, and a telegraph line already here. There's work to be done, work for everybody—the kind of work that counts. How do I know; maybe someday they'll put up a monument to me in the town square."

He was grinning again, and Bellane said, "Tell me something, Doc. You must know every inch of this range. What's this about an eccentric who lives in the Valley of the Three Sisters and who throws lead at anybody who comes calling?"

King stiffened. "I could tell you a great deal about him," he said. "But the person happens to be both my friend and my patient. What's your interest in the Three Sisters?"

"I'm stringing wire to Windigo by way of the valley. It's shorter."

King said, "I don't suppose my asking you not to would cut any ice."

"Look," Bellane said. "You're the third person tonight who's either asked me or told me to stay out of the Three Sisters. I've a hunch that each of you had a different reason for making the request. I like you, Doc, and I'd like to oblige. But I've got a job to do. And I think you're the only one of the three who could understand that. Adios."

Maneuvering his horse, he raised his hand in salute, and then he had his back to Doc King and was facing toward the distant camp where his work awaited him.

CHAPTER III

Where Time Stood Still

MOUNTAIN Telegraph was stringing wire, and the days of Kirk Bellane were full days, from dawn to dusk and beyond the darkness when huge brush fires lighted the scene for overtime workers while the race against time was run. His crew divided into three sections, the

vanguard dug post holes, the next crew cut poles and set them, while the third strung the wire. There was even a man to follow behind, trimming off any tree branches that touched the wire in this timbered, broken country. Years of this sort of construction had taught Bellane efficiency, and he put all of his training into this task, sweating with his men and being everywhere at once. M. T.'s equipment was good—sturdy wagons and rain-tight tents, cooking stoves and all utensils. The men were experienced; they'd strung wire on other ranges; and the problem, as always, was one of supply. But with Fowler as their base, and their own newly-strung wire to flash back the word of their various needings, they kept the freight wagons rumbling. And Kirk Bellane learned how to smile again, for the hills had seemingly swallowed Hutch Lucas of late. For almost a week there'd been no cut wires, no pelting rifle bullets, no trouble but the constant and ordinary troubles that came with crossing such terrain.

Then they were into the broadness of the Valley of the Three Sisters; the grassy panorama, tree-dotted, spread before them, and Bellane knew with his first look that this was country where he could cut down the construction hours. He set his eyes on the three distant hills that gave the valley its name, and the line moved straight north again.

Ranse Halloway came riding up from Fowler the first day they were in the valley. Big in the saddle, he had his careful look around, then rode up to where Bellane was directing the operations of the post-hole diggers. Clearing his throat, Halloway said, "I've had word from the head office, Bellane. They've approved your change of route. The big boss said that your judgment has never failed him yet. He knows your record better than I do. Maybe I was hasty the other night."

Bellane took the olive bough with the same grace it had been tendered. "Supplies have been coming through steady," he said. "That's Fowler's doing. Likely you've had a hand in seeing that everything's run smooth at the base. I'm grateful. I'll be wiring my thanks from Windigo one of these days."

Halloway scanned the sweep of valley to the northward. "Any trouble with the eccentric who run our surveyors out of here?"

"Nary a sign of him," Bellane said.

But the next day they had their second visitor.

The advance post-hole digger saw the man first, and his yell fetched Bellane on the bound. Topping a slight rise to the west and thus skylined for the moment was a tall, stately man, lean of face and with a carefully-trimmed silvery beard. This was the land of the man on horseback, but the queer note was the man's garb. For he wore the full regalia of a Confederate colonel of cavalry, complete to the saber, and he wore it in the manner of one who habitually wore such a uniform.

"Jumping Jehosophat!" said the post-hole digger. "Is this Confederate Memorial Day?"

"Take another look, Jake," Bellane advised. "You've only seen half the show."

For a second rider had bobbed over the rise to range alongside the first, and this second man was the giant Negro Domingo who filled a saddle to fulness. Now the two were coming forward, the Negro keeping at the heels of the colonel's horse, and when they were near enough for speech, the soldier raised a gauntleted hand in courteous salute and said, "Who's in charge heah?"

"I am," Kirk Bellane said and identified himself.

"I, sir," said the soldier, "am Colonel Cavendish. Ames Cavendish. Serving

under Lieutenant General Longstreet. I perceive, suh, that you are constructing a telegraph line. For whom, may I ask?"

SOME flash of intuition forged the lie for Bellane. "Our superiors are located in New Orleans, sir," he said.

"New Orleans!" Colonel Cavendish stiffened. "New Orleans, suh, is in Yankee hands!" He turned quickly to Domingo. "You've deployed our troops properly, Captain? We have this camp completely surrounded?"

Before them was the broad sweep of the valley, with only that one slight rise that had concealed the approach of these two. There was no place in the immediate vicinity where a body of men might be hidden, yet Domingo said solemnly, "Yo' orders have been carried out, suh," a note of sadness in his voice.

Suddenly Bellane understood — understood everything. This, then, was the eccentric who had held sway in the Valley of the Three Sisters, keeping Mountain Telegraph's surveyors out, forcing them to choose a longer route to Windigo. Bellane had expected a madman of the long-haired, bestial kind. Instead he had found a man courteous of manner, a man obviously of breeding. Yet this man was mad, so mad that for him time had stood still. A decade after the peace at Appomattox, the war that belonged to the yesterdays remained a reality to Colonel Ames Cavendish. It was laughable, and it was pathetic. It was unbelievable, but it was so.

What was it Doc King had said in Fowler when he, Bellane, had inquired about the eccentric of the Valley of the Three Sisters? "I could tell you a great deal about him. But the person happens to be both my friend and my patient."

And the girl—the one called Miss Belle who'd come with this same Domingo to save a trapped Mountain Telegraph man and to ask that man not to enter the Valley of the Three Sisters? The girl who'd had her own reasons which she hadn't cared to put into words. Kirk Bellane could see her face in Ames Cavendish's, and another riddle was solved. She was obviously Belle Cavendish, daughter of this man.

Now a lot of things were clear, but the problem was no less great because he understood. A measure of sympathy in his voice, Bellane said, "I'm a Texan myself, sir. Served under Bragg, And I give you a Confederate soldier's word that this telegraph is a private enterprise, having nothing to do with the war."

"A Texan?" Cavendish's thin face remained rigid. "Then why aren't you still in uniform, suh? You appear ablebodied. And no enterprise can be considered as having nothing to do with the war, so long as there is a war. You've had your say, and I'm not convinced. I perceive that you and your men are not properly armed for combat, and the fact that I came here under a sort of temporary truce stays my hand. I shall return within the week. If I find you and your men still here, I'll have no choice but to order a charge. Good day, suh!"

Behind Cavendish, Domingo shook his great head, and there was something in the gesture that was a plea for tolerance, a mute asking for understanding. Then Cavendish was wheeling his horse and the two went clattering up the rise where they were skylined again for a moment, a Don Quixote in Confederate gray and his own gigantic Sancho, and then they were gone.

MOST of Bellane's crew were now gathered at his back, and the bunch, silent the while, now buzzed with questions. "You think he means business?" one asked, and it was the query in the hearts of all of them.

"He means business all right," Bellane said. "But I reckon he's got more bark than bite. His cavalry troop is all in his head, of course, but even a couple of men with rifles could give us trouble. We're posting guards by night from here on out."

Thus was his decision made, and for him there could be no other. He did not even consider it as a decision; he had entered the Valley of the Three Sisters to string wire, and nothing had changed. Yet he picked his guards with care, and he saw that they were properly armed and situated, and he even took a shift himself, riding wide circles when the night came. And thus he was alert for anything the shadows might spew when Belle Cavendish came riding to him at midnight.

There was a moon, and that spared her from his challenge and from anything a nervous gun might have done. She drew up until they were stirrup to stirrup, and she sat her saddle, pale and ethereal in the moonlight, and she said, "He came to you today, didn't he?"

"Your father? Yes, him and that big Negro. He laid down the law good and proper."

"But you're still not turning back?"

"I'm sorry for him," Bellane said. "And I'm sorry for you, too. You see, I savvy all that you didn't put into words that other night. But I still can't put my personal feelings above the job."

She said, "He's got a special reason for hating telegraph wire. Do you remember the storming of Fort Loudon at Knoxville in '63? General Longstreet ordered the assault, and the men encountered telegraph wire strung between stumps, and that threw the front ranks into disorder with Federal cannon sweeping them. It was there that dad's head was creased by the rifle ball that took his memory. But I've heard him fight that telegraph wire in his sleep."

"You brought him up here to Montana?" Bellane asked gently.

She nodded. "As soon as I was old enough to take over his affairs. We have a ranch-house yonder to the west, and we run a few cattle with the help of a small crew. I thought that peaceful surroundings, far from even any talk of the strife there once was between North and South might work a cure. But the surroundings haven't been so peaceful. There's Hutch Lucas in the hills."

"He's given you trouble?"

"Not yet, but that's only because he's afraid of our crew. Dad kept a box at the bank in Fowler for a while. Then he got a queer delusion that the Federals were going to invade Fowler, and he moved the box to the ranch. The whole range buzzed with talk about that; making wild guesses as to what valuables that box contained. Hutch Lucas has heard the talk. Sooner or later he'll find the sign right and make his raid."

"That," said Bellane, "should be reason enough for your dad to keep his men close to home and out of my hair."

"We've only five men," she said. "Six, counting Domingo. He was a slave of ours in Kentucky; he's a West Indian Negro. Two of the crew are men who served under dad. The others we hired here in Montana. I don't need to tell you of a cowboy's loyalty, Mr. Bellane. Those men would probably storm the ramparts of Hades if dad told them to. And it's those men I've got to think about, too."

"Meaning—?"

"It was at dad's orders that our boys ran your company's surveyors out of the valley months ago. There was no bloodshed, but I was mighty worried at that time. For weeks I expected the law to come riding over that affair. But nothing happened. Now dad may send

his crew to give you trouble. If they obey, I suppose they'll all be outlawed. What of that?"

He said, "I reckon you know young Doc King from Fowler?"

"I know him," she said. "Very well. He's been treating dad. Sometimes he thinks he can bring about a cure. Sometimes I wonder if he only says that to make me happy."

"Talk to Doc King," Bellane advised. "He's got faith in this country. He's glad the railroad's coming, and the telegraph. He's got an eye on tomorrow. There must be a lot of folks like Doc King. As I see it, the job I'm doing is for that kind of folks. Where's the sense in letting those kind of people down to suit the fancy of one old gent who's living ten years behind the times?"

SHE was silent for a long moment. "I never thought about it that way," she admitted. "I've spent those ten years taking care of him, and that's become habit. Maybe I'm selfish, but I see that as my job. You see, I hand you back your own ideals, Mr. Bellane."

He looked at her and remembered all the strange, nameless longings of his years, the loneliness that came to a man even when he stood big among other men, the needing that was denied to a man wedded only to his work. But he shook his head.

"I'm going on through the valley," he said quietly. "You'd better tell your crew that."

This time it was she who jogged her horse and put her back to him, and, like that other night, he found himself alone in the magic of the moonlight, and all of this was like a dream remembered vividly but without reality.

And he wondered once more if he would ever see her again, but he did, before another sunset. For it was the very next day that hell let loose.

CHAPTER IV

Riders to the Rescue

THEY were stringing wire again, working with revolvers strapped at their hips and all the available rifles stacked nearby, and many a wary eye scanned the hill-hemmed distances that day. They were remembering that they might have to fight their small share of a war all over again, but when the trouble did come it was not what they were expecting. They saw the dust plume upon the valley's floor in mid-afternoon, and they watched a lone rider roaring toward them, and when the distance dwindled it was Belle Cavendish who slipped from a saddle and ran to where Kirk Bellane stood among his men.

She said desperately, frantically, "It's happened! The very thing I told you about! Hutch Lucas and his crew are raiding the ranch!"

He saw her now for the first time by daylight, and her beauty stood the test of the pitiless sun and the strain of a long and arduous ride. She swayed toward him, and he got her by the elbows, steadying her. "Easy, girl!" he warned, his voice brittle. "Now catch your breath and tell us all about it."

"Lucas came riding up at noon, him and his whole crew—nearly a dozen men. They started throwing bullets at once, circling the ranch-house at a gallop, Indian-style. I wasn't in the building; I'd been out riding, and the gunfire fetched me home. When I saw what was happening, I headed this way. Some of them saw me go and gave me chase, but I outran them. You've some saddlers here, Mr. Bellane. Order your crew to mount and follow me."

His first blind instinct was to obey her; all that was decent in him was urging him to do so, but even as he lifted his hand in signal, he had to remember

the job. That was the habit of the years. He was regaining those lost hours, but he was going to need every one of them if he was to reach Windigo on time. Given unobstructed days, he would do it, but there was a chance of trouble again—trouble from this same Hutch Lucas who was now occupying himself with other business. To his credit, Bellane was never deaf to a plea for help, but his sudden thought was that hysteria had magnified this affair in the eyes of Belle Cavendish.

He said, "Look, now. There's nothing to worry about, really. Seven guns are defending that ranch-house, according to the tally you told me about last night. And your crew has walls to shelter them, which gives them a big advantage. We'll flash a message back to Fowler for you—a message that will bring the law a-riding. They'll reach your ranch by nightfall. There's no need for my crew to lose half a shift in wild riding."

He thought for a moment that she was going to faint, but she stiffened instead, and her eyes blazed with scorn. "You said once that I might have a chance to collect the debt you owe me," she reminded him. "I kept remembering that as I rode here. I see now that no obligation except the one you owe your company means anything to you, Mr. Bellane. So I'll be getting back to the ranch to do what I can. There're only two guns holding off Lucas and his crew—my father's and Domingo's."

"Two guns!" he said weakly. "But the five riders who work for the spread—?"

"Dad called them to the house last night. He told them that a Federal telegraph line was being built into the valley. He warned them that they must be prepared for a fight today; he intended running you out of the valley. He was mad, stark mad—but he was also magnificent. I watched the faces of those men as he talked, and I saw what was there. They knew he was crazy, of course, but they also knew he was their boss and that he was asking them to defend the acres that we call home. It made a hard choice for them. No man should have to make such a choice."

"So—?"

"So I called them aside this morning and gave them their time. It was the only way to solve the situation for them. Better to have no crew, I reasoned, than a crew that had to outlaw itself by fighting you. Lucas must have been watching the spread from the hills by field glasses and seen the five of them ride away. That made it his time to strike. I knew I was running that risk when I let the boys go. I didn't think it would happen so soon."

Bellane said, "Up onto the horses, boys! We're riding!"

THUS was his decision made, and thus, for the first time, he turned his back upon the job that was cut out for him. Someday he would think about this and remember how the cards had fallen and marvel at the destiny that took him from his line at a time when he and his men were most needed on the job. Now there was time only for riding, and he led his men himself, riding stirrup to stirrup with Belle Cavendish across the rolling floor of Three Sisters Valley.

They erased the miles as the sun lowered toward the western wall; they came into a more broken country as they neared that wall, and, at long last, they topped a rise to look down upon a cluster of buildings partly concealed by thronging trees. And as they reined their horses as though by signal, the girl caught her breath for there was only silence below. No guns now, and that in itself was ominous. "Too late!" she cried.

Then they were riding again, roaring

down the slant and into the trees, and they burst through them and into the ranch yard, and what Bellane saw then he would always remember. The house that Colonel Cavendish had built was big and stately and reminiscent of Kentucky, and it made a fitting backdrop for the drama being enacted before it. There were dead men in the yard—men who had ridden with Hutch Lucas and who would ride no more. But there were living men, too, a swarm of them who were trying to pull down the giant Domingo who stood spread-legged in the yard, fighting them off.

Hutch Lucas was here, big and barrel-chested. Bellane had gotten only one glimpse of the outlaw that day Lucas had penned him at the foot of a cliff, but he knew the man. Lucas was hovering on the fringe of the fight, a gun wavering in his hand, awaiting the moment when he could fire without endangering his own crew. And that moment might come at any time.

Domingo had brought the fight to the enemy. Domingo had dared the yard and lived to close with Lucas' men. Probably the outlaws had been charging the house, and the giant had chosen this method to break the charge. How it had happened didn't matter; the man was like some black Sampson in the temple, a just wrath embodied in titanic flesh, a fury unleashed. But he was needing help, needing it badly.

Now that help was here. The Mountain Telegraph crew came swarming into the yard, the guns beginning a frantic banging, and Lucas' men, warned too late, turned to meet the attackers. Through a wild flurry of dust and noise and movement, Kirk Bellane fought his way, firing when there was a target, clubbing with his gun when men tried to drag him from his saddle. Then, suddenly, it was all over, and Lucas' men, outnumbered and outfought, were hoisting their hands, and Lucas himself was nursing a wounded shoulder and holding to a sullen silence.

Belle was out of her saddle and rushing to the giant who stood teetering upon his feet. "Dad—?" she cried, and Domingo rolled his big eyes toward the house. "He's bad hit, Miss Belle," he said. "Yo' better hurry."

She went running up the gallery, Bellane at her heels, and they burst into the house together to find Colonel Cavendish stretched upon the floor of the hall. He wore his Confederate uniform again today; he'd had a war to fight and he'd dressed for it. But now his eyes were closed and there was blood on his silvery beard, but his heart was still beating.

"This man needs a doctor," Bellane said. "But we'll get one in half the time you think it will take."

Then he was issuing an order that sent a couple of his men racing back to the telegraph line with instructions to get a message through to Fowler that would fetch Doc King on the double. The men gone, Bellane helped hoist Colonel Cavendish into a great white bed. They cut away his uniform, and they bandaged his wounds as well as they could, and while they were at this task, one of the crew came into the house.

"We've penned up Lucas and what's left of his men in one of the corrals, boss," he reported. "One of those outlaws is showing a yellow streak and talking his fool head off. That sawbones ain't going to be coming from Fowler. This morning, before the raid started, Lucas figured that somebody might try to get word through to the law. So he went off by his lonesome and cut the telegraph wire."

ACROSS the bed, something died in the eyes of Belle Cavendish, and Bellane said hastily, "Don't take this too hard. There's a fast way of finding

that break, and we'll have it repaired pronto. Come along, Jim."

Then he was striding out of the house and to the corral, but on his way he stopped at a saddle and harness shed, and when he came to where his men stood guard, he was holding a lariat in his hand. A fire burning dully in his eyes, he fashioned a noose in that lariat, and he tossed the loop over the crossbar above the gate of the corral, and he said, "Drag Lucas out here!"

They prodded Lucas forward and the outlaw stood there dumbly, but there was a hint of uncertainty in the man's eyes. Bellane said, "I'm making this short, Lucas. You're telling me where we'll find the break in M.T.'s wire, or you're doing an air dance."

Lucas said, "You can turn me over to the law, but you can't take the law into your own hands. You know that as well as I do. To blazes with you!"

Somebody was already lashing Lucas' hands behind his back. Bellane dropped the noose over the man's head, and he said, "Haul away, boys! If the law asks about this afterwards, I'll personally take the responsibility. I've got a debt to pay off, and I'm paying it today."

Ready hands were on the rope, and suddenly Lucas was standing on his tiptoes, and then there was only air between him and the ground. But at a signal from Bellane, the outlaw was lowered again, and Bellane loosened the rope. "Ready to talk?" he demanded.

Lucas, strangling, coughed and recovered his voice. "Blast you!" he said. But the uncertainty in his eyes had turned to stark fear. "The break is just this side of the entrance to the valley. And you'd never have found it! I cut the wire and put in a short splice of buckskin!"

At Bellane's elbow, one of his crew sucked in his breath. "You sure bluffed him out of it, boss!" he said.

"I'm not sure I was bluffing," Bellane said. "Take a couple of boys and get down there and fix that break. Hurry, now!"

Then he was eyeing Lucas again. "That was a smart trick, mister," he said. "We'd have looked for a cut wire trailing on the ground. We'd have looked forever. But it's such a smart trick that I don't see how a man who knows nothing about a telegraph line could have figured it out. So now you're going to tell me who you've been working for! Who hired you to bedevil us, and taught you the tricks you know?"

Lucas began cursing defiantly, but Bellane had made a signal and hands were on the rope again. The tightening noose was cutting off Lucas' wind, but he had time for one startled ejaculation.

"I'll talk!" he gasped, and the noose was loosened.

CHAPTER V

Crossfire

WHEN Bellane came back into the ranch-house, Colonel Cavendish was still in bed, but now his eyes were open and he regarded Bellane with a clear and steady look. "My daughter has just been telling me about you, suh," he said. "I seem to owe you an apology and an explanation, but I must ask your indulgence until my strength has returned." He passed his slim fingers across his forehead. "I think," he added wearily, "that I have been ill for a long, long time."

Bellane said, "You mean—?" and looked across the bed at Belle for confirmation, and when he saw the happiness in her eyes, he fully understood.

The girl said, "Jonathan—Doctor King—used to wonder if something like this might not work a cure. Dad's mind fled from him in the shock of battle; it has returned the same way. I never thought I'd live to bless the gun of Hutch Lucas."

Colonel Cavendish had slipped into an untroubled sleep, and Bellane stared in awe, not quite understanding how the miracle had been wrought but accepting the reality of it. Belle said, "You can finish putting your wires through the Three Sisters, Mr. Bellane. And as long as your telegraph line stands, you'll never have to worry about anybody tampering with this section of it. My father was never without gratitude. He'll be remembering what the Mountain Company's men did for him today. All his old hatred will be gone."

"I'll reach Windigo on time," he said. "Hutch Lucas will bother us no longer, nor will his paymaster. I reckon you'll be hiring your crew back again. But you once spoke of a box of valuables that your father kept here—the box that tempted Lucas to try this raid. I'd put it back in the Fowler bank, if I was you."

She laughed, but there was no bitterness in it. "That box contains Confederate bonds," she said. "Worthless paper. Dad will doubtless dump it into the fireplace when he's up and about."

Bellane said, "He's not the only one who ever got his sense of values twisted. Perhaps I was a one-sided man, myself. But it isn't often that a man gets a chance to pay *all* his debts at the same time. And now I must be riding, to Fowler. The telegraph break is being repaired, and Doc King will soon be on his way. But Hutch Lucas told me something that gives me one more chore to do."

His voice must have turned grimmer than he'd intended, for Belle's eyes shadowed, and she said, "You'll be coming back? I'll see you again?"

"Perhaps," he said and strode from the house.

The dusk of that summer's day found him back at the telegraph line, and he changed horses at the camp, for his own was lathered and weary. Deep darkness found him at the southern end of the Valley of the Three Sisters, and when he passed the section where Lucas had cut the line, he saw no sign of his own men.

He judged that they had already repaired the line and that he'd missed them between the camp and this spot, and he spurred onward. The moon rose after he'd covered a few more miles, and in the full light of it he saw a buckboard careening up out of the south. Blocking the trail, he forced it to a stop.

"Don't wear out that whip, Doc," he advised. "The Colonel's doing nicely, and he'll keep till you get there. And nothing short of a cannon will ever kill Domingo."

Dr. Jonathan King sighed a heavy sigh and relaxed on the seat. "Your telegraph people in Fowler brought me the word as quickly as it came. The details were few, so I drove as fast as I could. But what about Belle? Is she all right?"

"The girl? Fit as a fiddle."

But he'd noticed the deep concern in the voice of young Doc King, and suddenly he understood that there was another reason why this medico had chosen to spend his years in this section—a reason Doc King hadn't mentioned that night in Fowler. And because this was as it should be, he wondered why he had not guessed it before.

He raised his hand then and said, "So long, Doc. You've got your work to do—I've got mine. We'd better get at it."

THEN he was heading southward again, and midnight was past when he bucked the press of Fowler's teaming street. Yet there was still a light in Mountain Telegraph's office, and he racked his horse before this hastily-erected building and stepped down from the saddle, a weariness sweeping through him as he felt the full weight of the hours and the miles he'd put behind him. Crossing the board walk, he shouldered into the single room, and this was like that other night when he'd come here, for once again only Ranse Halloway was in the office.

"Howdy, Halloway," Bellane said.

Halloway hoisted his big body out of the swivel chair before the pigeon-holed desk and said, "I'm mighty glad to see you, Bellane. What in thunder's going on up in the valley? In the late afternoon we found the line was dead. Then, when the break got fixed, we received some sort of garbled message urging Doctor King to hurry to the Cavendish ranch up there. But there's a lot that's not clear."

"Hutch Lucas raided the Cavendish place this afternoon," Bellane said. "Miss Cavendish came to our camp and asked for our help, and I took the boys to the fight. Now don't get worried about the time we lost! We'll get through to Windigo on schedule. I'm not expecting any more trouble. You see, Hutch Lucas told me who hired him to bedevil us."

Halloway lost some of his high floridness, and a stiffness took hold of him.

"Tell me, Halloway," Bellane went on. "Just what did you expect to gain by keeping M. T.'s wire from reaching Windigo on time?"

He was watching the big man closely; he expected Halloway to show anger or to bluff or to do any of the ordinary things under such circumstances as these, but Halloway merely shrugged his well-tailored shoulders.

"I'm a minority stockholder in M.T.," Halloway said. "Some time ago I had a chance to secretly buy a considerable block of Consolidated stock. Consolidated's whole future here in the West was dependent upon Mountain Telegraph's falling down on this Windigo job, and speculators, hearing of Mountain's progress, began dumping Consolidated stock. The price was right, and the opportunity readily suggested itself to me. I merely played both ends against the middle. I was out to defeat Mountain, which would mean a small loss to me. But I'd more than recoup when Consolidated scooped all future wire stringing jobs in Montana."

"You're admitting all this?"

"A confession?" Halloway laughed. "No, I'm making no confession. I could hardly expect my connections with Consolidated to remain secret very long. There's no law against buying stock, or holding stock in two rival concerns. And I'm afraid Hutch Lucas' word won't carry far against mine in a court, not even in this untutored land. I pointed out to you once that Lucas had his own personal reasons for not wanting wire strung through this country. The consensus will likely be that his personal reasons inspired him tc his various acts against Mountain Telegraph. You won't have much of a case, Bellane."

"But you kept Lucas informed about Mountain's movements," Bellane accused. "Lucas admitted that to me. Come to think of it, that day that Lucas waylaid me, I was coming here to Fowler because you'd wired that you wanted to see me. You told Lucas I'd be on the trail that day! And you taught Lucas the trick of cutting a line and splicing it with buckskin!"

"Did I?" Halloway was laughing again. "I think Lucas' past record in this section proves he's got sense enough to have figured out his own tricks."

BELLANE'S eyes narrowed. "You win," he admitted. "I can see it now. You've played this fairly safe, and you can likely make your side of it stick. I don't savvy much about high financing and stock manipulations, and maybe what you done isn't even a crime in your eyes. I wouldn't know about that. But I see a gun laying on your desk. If there's any man in you, I'm asking you—begging you—to grab for that gun!"

"Why should I?" Halloway countered.

Thus they stood, their eyes locked, Bellane angry but defeated, Halloway cornered but triumphant, and in the silence that built between them, the telegraph instrument on the table began clacking. And, as always, Kirk Bellane instinctively spelled out the message that was coming over the wire:

F-O-W-L-E-R W-H-Y D-O-N'-T Y-O-U R-E-S-P-O-N-D? F-O-W-L-E-R W-E'-V-E B-E-E-N T-R-Y-I-N-G T-O G-E-T Y-O-U F-O-R H-O-U-R-S. H-A-S K-I-R-K B-E-L-L-A-N-E A-R-R-I-V-E-D? T-E-L-L H-I-M H-U-T-C-H L-U-C-A-S E-S-C-A-P-E-D C-A-V-E-N-D-I-S-H R-A-N-C-H S-T-O-L-E H-O-R-S-E A-N-D H-E-A-D-E-D S-O-U-T-H A-C-K-N-O-W-L-E-D-G-E P-L-E-A-S-E.

Such was the message Bellane heard, and hearing it, his eyes widened with understanding. Lucas had managed to escape! And Lucas was heading for Fowler town! The camp had been trying to get that message through for hours, which meant that Lucas must have been close behind him, Bellane, all the miles down from the Valley of the Three Sisters. Lucas might even now be in Fowler, and there was something in Halloway's broad face that told Bellane that Lucas was indeed here. Halloway had been bluffing after all; Ranse Halloway, schemer, was not as certain as he'd pretended that his devil-try had been air tight. Halloway, cornered, was prepared to fight, but he'd wanted the sign right and he'd merely stalled for time.

The proof of it was in Halloway's wild leap toward the gun that lay upon his desk. And as he leaped, he shouted, *"Get him, Lucas! Get him good!"*

A boot sole scraped in the doorway behind Bellane, and Bellane knew that Lucas was there. Lucas had indeed come to Fowler, and Lucas would have a gun; any handy holster out there on the street would have provided him with one. Perhaps some queer streak in the outlaw had kept his loyalty to Halloway intact, even after the truth had been choked out of him at the Cavendish ranch. Perhaps Lucas had money due from Halloway, and he had to side the man once more if he was to collect that money. There was no time for speculation—not with the gun of Hutch Lucas behind him, and the gun of Ranse Halloway before him.

And one of those guns—Lucas'—was booming, but Kirk Bellane was already falling sideways to the floor. Beyond this building, the saloons of Fowler roared full-throated, the freight wagons rumbled along the street, but in the midst of all this teeming activity, Bellane knew that he was alone with his fight. He was triggering as he fell, and he caught Halloway in his sights. The big man had reached the gun, swiveled around with it and was bringing it level when Bellane's lead struck him, crumpling him against the desk.

A bullet splintered the floor, inches from Bellane's face. Rolling frantically, Bellane felt the burn of lead along his ribs, but now he was on his back, and he could see Hutch Lucas in the doorway. That was a target to fill a man's sights, and he triggered three swift shots at the bigness of the man, and then he saw Lucas come tiptoeing into the office. For a moment the outlaw stood

teetering, his gun slipping from numbed fingers, and then Lucas sprawled across the body of Ranse Halloway.

Out of the sudden silence, the telegraph instrument chattered again: F-O-W-L-E-R, W-H-Y D-O-N'-T Y-O-U R-E-S-P-O-N-D. . . . ?

SLOWLY Bellane got to his feet and fell to making a clumsy pad for his wound. In the raucous night life of Fowler, the confined blare of the guns had gone unnoticed; he was still alone, but at least his chore was finished, and he walked unsteadily to the door. A dozen riders were coming up the street, and when they swung from saddles before the office, he saw that one of them was a girl, and the others were men of his own crew. They engulfed him in a questioning circle, and he jerked his thumb at what lay inside the office, and that told them all they needed to know.

"Lucas managed to sneak out of the corral," one of them told him. "We likely should have been watching him closer, but we thought his shoulder was too badly hurt for him to try anything like that. Probably he made it seem worse than it was, to fool us. We put one of the boys on the wire to get word to you, left a few to watch Lucas' men at the Cavendish place, and took the trail."

"It doesn't matter," Bellane said. "See if you can rustle some fresh horses at the livery stable. We've got to get back to the valley. There's still wire to string to Windigo. But we'll make it on time."

Belle Cavendish lingered when the others had left. Looking at her, Bellane said,

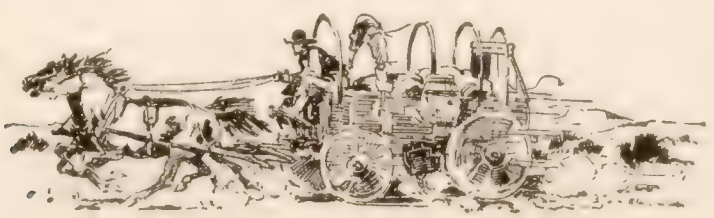
"So you came, too."

"Your men took Lucas' trail because they thought you might be in danger," she said. "You sided me today; I had to come to side you tonight, if needs be. But now I must be getting back to the ranch. We met Jonathan—Doctor King—on the trail. He'll have both dad and Domingo patched up nicely by now."

He said, "And he'll be waiting for you to come back to the ranch. The Doc, I mean."

She extended her hand. "Wherever your trail takes you in the days to come, we'll be thinking of you—all of us. Whenever I see a telegraph line marching against the sky, I'll be reminded of you."

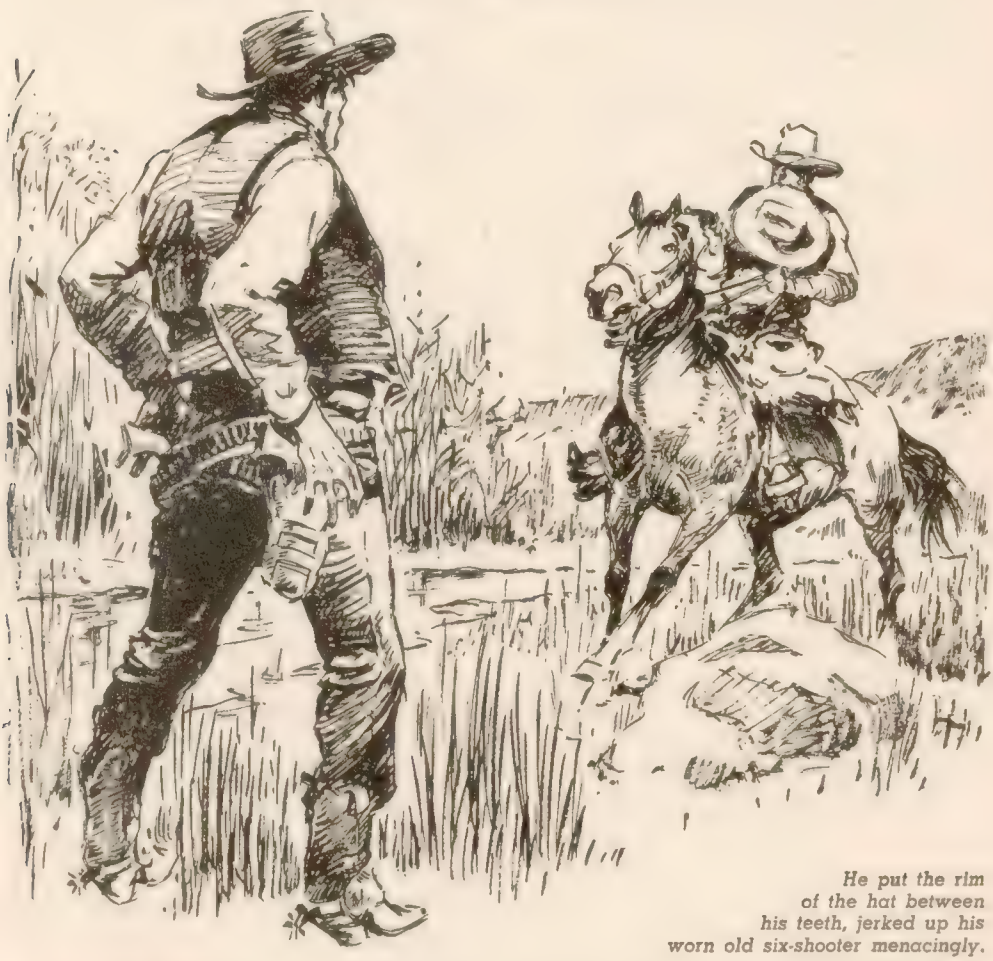
That was his reward, that was what he was to take with him from the Valley of the Three Sisters. Watching this girl as she lost herself in the press of Fowler's humanity, he remembered a dream briefly cherished and a hunger unfulfilled. That was his lot; some peopled a range, others made it fit for peopling. For him there would be work to do as long as there was a frontier. And thinking of that, he surrendered once again to his destiny, surrendered without bitterness and with the strange and glowing pride of a man who followed the dictates of a greater need than his own. . . .



"MY LINE FENCE IS A LONG RIFLE!"

By HAPSBURG LIEBE

Free range, the tall graybeard claimed, fell to the gent who staked it first, and this salty oldster was choosing a long gun barricade for his line fence!



He put the rim of the hat between his teeth, jerked up his worn old six-shooter menacingly.

DUSK was settling over Santos River valley. A cook fire made shadows that played around the shack and the covered wagon, kept shadows flitting among the cottonwoods that lined the river bank. A tall and bony, gray-bearded man rose behind the blaze and bent an ear to the slow beat of hoofs. Another minute, and a slim youth of twenty, in ragged cowboy clothes, was reining a dish-faced paint pony to a halt near the graybeard.

"You got plenty nerve," the youth said, "squattin' here on the biggest cow spread in the county."

"Free range," the tall squatter drawled, "belongs to them which can hold it, and I got a brass-bound Kaintucky rifle which says I pine blank aim to stay here."

"You from Kentucky?" the newcomer asked.

"Five-six years back. Had awful hard luck, down to thutty cows now. Name's Holloway; fust name, Kaintuck—I mean, them who knows me calls me that. Who're you, son?"

The visitor frowned. "I'm Young Truby. It was m'daddy's name, too; Young Truby. Sorta bad, he was, him and his brothers; they all got killed, fightin' law. Made a bad name for me, and on account o' that I cain't find a range job anywheres."

He stepped out of his saddle and dropped r e i n. Kaintuck Holloway scowled at the worn old six-shooter in leather at Truby's hip, lifted his gaze and inquired:

"Who claims this grazin', cowboy?"

"Bob Moreland," answered Young Truby. "Wild, knowed mostly as Bobcat. Only him left o' the family. He's got a foreman, Roby Arn, who'd kill a man to see him kick. Bobcat raises gold hosses on the side. Palominos, that is; not ponies, but fine big hosses. Sinc Talbot has been tryin' to buy them pals, but Moreland won't sell; he never liked Sinc nohow. G a m b l e r and flashy dresser, Sinc is, and dog-mean. Well, I reckon this is all I know to tell you. Spare me a little supper, Kaintuck?"

Old Holloway's bony fingers were combing his beard in a thoughtful fashion. "Why, sure," he said, "and welcome."

THEY had no more than finished off the bacon, flapjacks and coffee when there was a fast ring of hoofs and then a handsome pale-gold stallion came rearing to a stop in the firelit circle. The rider was tall and dark, of a dashing breed, not older than twenty-four and dressed well.

"This is my range, pilgrim," he said sharply to Kaintuck. "You can't settle here."

Holloway rose. His eye was hard. "I've done settled here, pardner. See that shack? Knocked her down and brung her fawty mile in the wagon, me and the Mexie who was helping with my little drive. Not runnin' many cows. Skassly. Jest my t h u t t y and the natchel increase. Ruther be a good neighbor to you than a bad 'un, pardner."

Truby watched Bobcat Moreland closely. Moreland did not even seem aware of Truby's existence. Then Bobcat flung out:

"I won't have squatters! You be gone by sundown tomorrow!"

He reined the pale-gold horse leftward and vanished in the night. From somewhere along the river a whippoorwill called. It occurred to Truby that the bird was mocking Kaintuck. Holloway swore into his beard. Truby said:

"You'll be buckin' somethin', Kaintuck, when you go up against the Moreland Big M."

The old s q u a t t e r said, "Listen, Young. I have always been a law-abidin' man, I pine blank have. I aim to call on the law for pertection here, don't expect to get it, but my conscience will be clear ef I am fo'ced to shoot and kill somebody. A stranger, I don't know where to find a sheriff to tell him, so I'm astin' you to do it for me. Will you, Young?"

He had fed Truby when Truby was hungry, and ingratitude was not one of Truby's sins.

The ragged cowboy soon veered from the river, rode half a mile and crossed a creek, then turned his pony into the county road. On either side of him the range was thick now with Moreland whiteface cattle. Another half-mile, and a lane led off to the Big M ranch buildings.

A palomino gelding came tearing out of the lane and collided with the cowboy's paint in the darkness, unseating

the cowboy. But he clung to the rein and stopped the paint. The gelding kept going fast southward. Its rider wasn't Bobcat Moreland; Bobcat was taller; the darkness notwithstanding, Truby had been able to see that.

"Somebody stealin' a palomino?" He wondered as he sprang back into his saddle. "High-tail, pinto, and maybe we can find out where the pal goes."

After twenty minutes the unknown rider slowed the gelding a little. When at last he reined into the dim main street of Santos City, Young Truby was not far behind him. Then the unknown was stopping at the sheriff's office, which was lighted by an oil lamp on a scarred rolltop desk.

Sheriff Todd Emmett, lank and grizzled and granite stern, came out of a doze in his swivel-chair at the hasty rattle of boot-heels through the street doorway. He saw a big but squat, red-complected man who carried a big six-shooter in a half-breed holster under his hip.

Emmett barked, "What's up, Roby?"

"Murder," said Roby Arn, Big M range boss. "Todd, you know I got a repitation for makin' gun ruckuses, and I thought—"

"Earned the reputation, too," bristled the lawman. "You'll tone down or I'll jail you down, Roby. Same goes for Bob Moreland. I've honed for a chance to tell you and Bob this. Now go on with your rat-killing."

"Well," Roby Arn said. "I thought I might be accused of it, and I saddled the fust hoss I seen and lit out to tell you the minute I'd set eyes on the corpse: It's layin' in the creek willows there back o' the corrals. Sinclair Talbot!"

Young Truby caught his breath and pressed closer to the open window listening for more. The officer slitted a cold eye.

"In the dark, Roby? How come you in the willows after dark?"

"I'd heard a groan," Roby said. "It'd broke off suddenlike."

"Sinc told me yesterday that he was goin' out there," Sheriff Todd Emmett said, "aiming to try once more to buy that palomino string. Funny, and Sinc always so damn mean to horses. Bob Moreland despised Sinc, and had run him off and warned him not to come back; said he'd shoot him, if he did, and you know how hot-headed Bob is. Where was he, Roby, when this happened?"

"I don't know. We hadn't seen him around for an hour or so. We'd heard shots, but hadn't paid much attention. Somebody was always shootin'. It wasn't me done it, Todd."

EMMETT smiled queerly. "Nobody said you did, Roby." Emmett lifted Arn's gun from its holster, sniffed the muzzle, put the gun back without a word. Young Truby spoke across the windowsill:

"Sheriff, I'll tell you one place Bobcat Moreland was. Up at the furder end o' his range orderin' an old squatter off, that's where. Right after dark. That squatter is a good man, name of Kaintuck Holloway. He sent me to tell you he's expectin' you to pertect him there."

The officer frowned. So did the Big M range boss. Arn said, "It's that Truby young 'un, whose daddy and uncles was such strong medicine. His nor the squatters alibi wouldn't be any good, Todd, would it?"

"I reckon not, because the time of the killing wasn't set," Todd Emmett answered. "You there, Truby. Tell your squatter I'm only a sheriff, and this is big cow country, and that no squatter ever got anywhere in it yet—right or wrong. But I'll handle the killers! Roby, find old Doc Beardsley while I run for my horse."

The three rode out of town northward

ten minutes later. Young Truby tagged along behind on his dish-faced pinto. Young spoke to the sheriff:

"That squatter is from Kentucky, and he'll fight."

"Too bad," Emmett said, and he said no more.

Before leaving ranch headquarters, Foreman Arn had given orders to the effect that the remains of Sinclair Talbot were to be guarded but not even approached. A dozen Big M cowboys waited near the edge of the creek willows when Arn and his companions arrived. Truby, also, rode up and dismounted.

There was a lantern. Beardsley, coroner, took the lantern, motioned the others to keep back and stepped into the willows. His eyes scanned the soft ground. Then he was kneeling beside that which had been Sinclair Talbot, flashy dresser and gambler. The others watched with keen interest, silently.

After a few minutes, Beardsley noted again the blue-edged red spot high on the left side of Talbot's forehead, rose and turned back to the sheriff.

"Sinc wasn't shot in there, Todd. He staggered into the willows from out here somewhere. It was a good shot; not close, or there'd be powder burns. In his pockets he had a watch, cards, a derringer that hadn't been fired, and some loose change. Think it could have been robbery?"

"No way of telling, right now," Emmett said. "Pretty sure he kept his money in the bank, though."

None had been more attentive than Young Truby. He said, "One thing you didn't notice, Doc. Where's Sinc Talbot's fine big Stetson hat?"

The hat had vanished. A rock-hard voice, the voice of Bob Moreland, came from the blackness that swathed the willows across tthe creek. Moreland, too, had been watching and listening.

"I get it, Emmett. I'll be accused of killing Sinc Talbot. I did say I'd shoot him if he came back here, I know, but I was mad then. With the buck-wild reputation I've got, I'll go up for life—if I don't hang—if I'm caught. So I'll not be caught!"

There was a rustling of willow brush, then the creak of leather as Moreland swung up to the back of his big palomino. The zealous lawman filled his right hand with black-walnut and steel and dashed toward the other side of the shallow stream. His words cut sharply into the pounding of horseshoe-iron on turf.

"Halt, Bob, or I'll shoot!"

Two seconds later he made good his threat. But the howl of the weapon caused no break in the steadily fading rhythm of the pale-gold stallion's hoofs. Todd Emmett leathered up and went, swearing, back across the creek.

"We've got an outlaw on our hands now Doc," he told Beardsley, "and one whose hide will be a tough job nailing to the jailhouse door."

ONE word of that stuck tight in Young Truby's mind. Outlaw. His father had been one. Somehow this fact built up a sort of kinship between him and Bobcat Moreland.

The ragged cowboy got into his saddle and rode away in the night.

The atmosphere was clearer, the stars brighter, when he came to the little shack on the upper Santos River. He could see that Kaintuck Holloway's thirty trail-gaunted cows were all there. It was late, now; no use waking the tired old squatter. Soundlessly he took saddle and bridle off his pony and turned the animal into the new little pole corral with Kaintuck's two horses.

Then he spied something that made him think of ghosts. It had just stopped between the covered wagon and the door of the shack. He heard a weak, uncertain cry:

"Squatter!"

Instantly following there was a heavy thump. The horse had not moved. Gaunt, bearded Kaintuck Holloway, half dressed, came from the shack with his Kentucky Winchester in his hands. He knelt with Truby over the supine and motionless form of Bob Moreland. The younger man wiped a matched into flame.

"Blood," Holloway said. "Shot, looks like, and fell out o' his saddle here."

He straightened and ran into the shanty, in no time was back with a lantern. Moreland was white under his tan. He blinked toward the light, muttering:

"Know anything about doctoring, *viejo?*"

"Used to be called a medinary good hoss doctor, and have read doctor medical books some," Holloway drawled. In haste he examined the wound. "Appearently you was hit, Moreland, nigh the bottom o' the skull, a little behind, close, I seem to rickollect, to where the seat of vision is in the hooman brain. You been blind any, by spells?"

"Blind and flighty," Moreland said. "Now I can see, now I can't. It was the sheriff's bullet. Law's wrong this time, but. . . ."

He was not clearly himself again until past sunrise. He lay inside the shack, on Kaintuck Holloway's bunk, and his head was bandaged. Near him he saw then the sober, lean face of Young Truby.

"Hi, button," he said, and began feeling at his holster. "Where's my gun?"

"I'm no button," Truby said. "I'll vote next year. I put your gun on the shelf there."

It was a staghorn-handled big six-shooter. Moreland half smiled and said. "I've been used to thinking of you as a button, Young. Where's the squatter?"

"Outside fixin' somethin' to eat." Young kept going:

"No bone was broke in, that Kaintuck could find, and he thinks you'll soon be all right. You was a heap delirrus last night, Bobcat. You'd tell Sinc Talbot to get away from here, get away from here. Old Holloway is stuck about that. He cain't see why you'd despise Sinc so much. And me, I don't either."

Moreland didn't say anything. That is, not until Kaintuck Holloway had come in with the food for him. Then he said:

"Kaintuck, I hated Sinclair Talbot because he was so mean to horses. Once I saw him nearly beat a fine colt to death with a whipstock. I knocked his ears down for it. Then he had the brass to try over and over to buy my palominos. Meant to sell 'em to a circus, I think."

"Yeah, they're showy, with their cream manes and tails," Holloway said. "Now, Moreland, start eatin'. Truby, your breakfast it at the fire outside. Me, I et whilst I was cookin'."

Young went out. While he ate, he glanced frequently off down the long valley range. In the shack Holloway was talking again now, and he voiced thoughts that were identical with the ragged cowboy's.

"Must be a sight o' good in anybody who loves hosses the way you do, Moreland.

"Young told me about the killin'. Said Talbot's derringer was in his pocket and hadn't been fired, and anybody which likes hosses the way you do, why, I jest pine blank cain't see him shootin' a man without givin' him a chanst. And so, Moreland, the thing for us to do is to clearify you by findin' out who did kill Talbot. Don't y'see?"

"Us?" echoed Moreland.

"Why, sure. Me and Young too. Even a squatter and a ragged cowpoke can be hooman. If—"

TRUBY spoke from the doorway, interrupting. "Two men ridin' up the range, Bobcat. I'm bettin' that it's Sheriff Todd Emmett and a deputy. If I was you, Bobcat, don't believe I'd try shootin' it out with the law. My daddy and uncles did, and look where they are now."

Bob Moreland had gone staggering to his feet and was reaching for his stag-horn-handled gun. Truby had seen that he was in no condition for a long hard ride. Moreland froze and stared. For a full minute he stared. Then:

"You might be right, Young. Guess I'll not make a stab at running, either. Don't like the idea of being hunted like a calf-killing lobo, now that I've had time to think about it. I've got a plan that will maybe work."

Sheriff and the deputy came on, soon spied the palomino stallion. Riding up, they saw the wild young cattleman standing in the doorway of the shack. Moreland's weapon was in its leather now. He spoke quickly:

"You're early, Todd. I expected you'd be up here, but not until later. Needn't bother about getting off your horses; I'll go with you peaceably—if you'll do me a little favor, that is. It's this. Let me work with you, Todd, giving me a free-hand, for three days in the business of finding out who did shoot and kill Sinclair Talbot. Will you do it?"

Emmett's right hand was ready on the butt of his gun. So was the deputy's. Emmett said, "Looks like an open-and-shut case, Bob. I can't see that there's any use wasting time in the way you just mentioned. Judge and jury are sure to give you a fair trial, Bob."

"Fair," Moreland replied, "as they see it. In any case of this kind, judge and jury would be more or less on the fence, and my threatening to shoot Talbot, coupled with my reputation for hot-headedness, are sure to push 'em the wrong way. Give me two days then, Todd?"

"You suspect anybody?" after a thoughtful moment inquired the senior officer.

Moreland scowled. He didn't answer. Emmett spoke again:

"Maybe you've got Roby Arn in your mind. Nobody knows range work better than Roby, but he's no straight hombre, and with you gone he'd have his own way with your big ranch; yeah, that's true. Is it Arn you've got in your mind now, Bob?"

No answer. Moreland knew what it was to be accused falsely, and he really had nothing on his range boss.

"Come on, let's go," Todd Emmett said. "On our way to town we'll stop at your place and look for sign that we might have missed last night; we can see better now. Er—the more I think about Arn, Bob, the more I'm willing to believe that he didn't tell me all he could have told me."

Moreland's dark eye flashed a little. Young Truby asked, "Sheriff, did you find Sinc Talbot's hat after I left the Big M headquawters last night?"

"Don't believe we did," the grizzled lawman said. "But what could Sinc's hat have to do with it?"

"Well," Truby said, "don't it sorta look like somebody done away with the hat?"

"But why?"

"Well," Truby said, ill at ease now, "s'pose the hat had somethin' in it that the killer did—didn't want anybody to see?"

"But what?"

"Well, s'pose Sinc, layin' there in the willows dyin', s'pose he had a pencil and wrote the name o' the man who'd killed him in his hat hopin' you'd find it?"

Emmett was not very greatly impressed. Bobcat Moreland half smiled at Truby and said, "Thanks, Young,"

and went toward his fine, big pale-gold palomino.

OFFICERS and prisoner rode off. Truby caught out and saddled his dish-faced paint, swung up to leather and rode after them. When he'd made a few hundred yards, he looked over a shoulder and saw Kaintuck Holloway coming on the bare back of a wagon horse.

The ragged cowboy was in the act of crossing the Big M creek when a thought exploded like gunpowder in his brain. The thing seemed very simple now. Sinclair Talbot had fallen near a bank of the stream, his hat had dropped into the water and the current had carried it off, that was all.

In anybody else, this would have buried the whole of the big suspicion. But in Young Truby it didn't, quite. No Truby had ever quit until, as the saying is, the last dog was hung. He reined his pony up the creek, and, screened by the bank willows, began looking for the Talbot hat. Kaintuck Holloway rode on following Todd Emmett, his deputy and Bobcat Moreland.

No eddy spot or drift escaped the eye of Young Truby. He was halfway to the Big M buildings when he found it, lodged against a barely submerged dead bush. Leaning downward from his saddle, he caught the hat up and shook the water from it. There was he noted instantly, a tiny hole low in the crown in front, a hole to match the fatal wound in Sinclair Talbot's forehead.

Before he could examine the inside, willows parted on the left bank and he saw the heavy red-complected face of the Moreland ranch foreman.

"Hi, young 'un," Roby Arn said, with cold iron in his voice. "What's that you got there?"

"'Zactly what you been huntin' for yourself," Truby was moved to say, "though I don't know why just yet. I'm takin' it to the sheriff."

"Todd Emmett sent me to look for that," Roby Arn said, and of course he was lying. "Throw it to me young'un."

Truby said, "I told you I was takin' this hat to the sheriff, didn't I?"

His slim hands moved fast. He put the rim of the hat between his teeth to hold it, jerked up his worn old six-shooter menacingly and began backing his pony through the willows, away from Arn. The squat big man also had reached for a weapon. But he froze at sight of the Truby gun. There never had been a Truby who couldn't hit a walnut in the air with a six-shooter.

Once out of the willows, Young dug his heels into the flanks of the paint and put the animal into a swift, low gallop. He half expected a whizzing slug. But none came.

Roby Arn was through.

Kaintuck Holloway arrived at Big M headquarters to see the two officers and Bobcat Moreland just coming out of the creek willows back of a palomino corral. Kaintuck dismounted, walked over to them and wanted to know:

"You find any sign?"

The deputy shook his head slowly. The four men stood there in silence that soon became heavy. It was broken by a clattering of hoofs, a splashing of water, and Young Truby rode up. Truby's lean countenance was strangely bright. He sailed the Talbot Stetson straight to the hands of Todd Emmett, and said:

"I found it in the creek a good ways below here, where it had floated down. Roby Arn was huntin' it too. He tried to make me give it to him."

The sheriff looked the hat over without comment.

"I notice," Young said, "Arn didn't come back here." His gaze snapped to Kaintuck Holloway, who drawled:

"Arn a heavy-set, red-lookin' man? Ef he is, I seen him. I pine blank did.

Ridin' a streak towards the west hills, he was, like the devil hisself was nippin' at his heels."

Emmett turned to Bob Moreland. "Why would Arn be running, Bob?"

The young cattleman frowned in puzzled fashion and shrugged. Emmett noted once more the tiny hole in the Talbot Stetson, then passed the hat to Moreland, who also looked at the hole. Young Truby's eyes were twinkling as they hadn't twinkled before. He said:

"I'm sure I got it figgered straight, Bobcat. Roby Arn saw Sinc Talbot killed, knowed you'd be accused of it and it would likely stick, and wanted you to go up because then he'd have his way with your big outfit like the sheriff mentioned. I mean, he could sell off most o' your prime whitefaces to rustlers' markets and be gone with a fortune in cash before anybody knowed any better. It's a gilt-edge, first-class bet that he's run now because he's seen that Sinc's hat would tell the whole tale!"

THEY only stared at him. He kept going: "The killin' musta been in late daylight. I figger that Arn used up at least an hour tryin' to find that hat before he rode to town with the news."

Bob Moreland said in wild hope, "Clear me, Young, and you've got a lifetime job with me. I'll cut out the rough stuff and we'll make the old Big M hum. Go ahead!"

"I'd sure be a heap tickled," the ragged cowboy said. "But what about Kaintuck there, Bobcat?"

Moreland spoke quickly: "I owe him a good deal. He can stay here long as he lives. All right, who did shoot Sinclair Talbot?"

Truby was enjoying it. He came out with this:

"Well, when Sinc got here, late in the day, you wasn't here, and natchelly he loafed around the palomino corrals. You know how mean to hosses he was. Well, he's teased the palominos, and one of 'em has kicked through a corral fence and killed him!"

"How do you know?" Moreland jerked out.

"It's simple," the ragged cowboy said. "Examine the teeny hole in Sinc's hat plumb close, and you'll see it's got square corners like the end of a hoss-shoe would make, and ain't round like a bullet a-tall. I'm bettin' that if the doc will examine the hole in Sinc Talbot's skull plumb close, he'll find that it's got teeny square corners too!"

That, also, was to prove a gilt-edge, first-class bet.

The Boomtown That Built a Man

By DAVID X. MANNERS

Yes, gold was flowing freely in Tularosa, but Liam Ogelthorpe's new livery was corraling none of it. . . . A stranger who wasn't tough or crooked or gun-hung found it hard going in this falsefront frontier boomtown. . . .

"What kind of a murder trap is this?" Liam yelled.

LIAM Ogelthorpe stepped dazedly from the monte room of the Land Office saloon, walked numbly outside. His well-formed mouth twisted out of shape. His eyes stared unseeingly at the ground. He ran nervous fingers through his mussed red hair.

"Busted," he muttered unbelievingly. "Busted flat."

A laugh sounded beside Liam, as the gambling hall's batwing doors flapped shut behind him. There was no mistaking Flash Bowron's belly laugh. The gambling hall owner's slap on the back was meant to be at once friendly and comforting.

"Come on, young feller," Bowron chided. "What's the trouble? Buck up; it can't be as bad as all that."

Liam turned slowly. His yellow-

speckled, gray eyes met Bowron's for a moment, then dropped again. He dug his hands deep into his boot-tucked serge pants.

"Maybe not," Liam said. He looked slowly down the street to his near bankrupt livery, which he'd opened here in Tularosa ten months before. "It's just that when you're figurin' on pickin' up some cash you need, and then you don't—"

"Gamblin's gamblin'," put in Bowron. He patted his plump bay window reflectively. "But still, I'm sorry you lost—even if it was my own saloon and my own housemen who raked in the profit." His voice grew cheery. "But you'll make it up, redhead. There's plenty cash around."

LIAM still studied his own failing livery. No activity stirred within its wide-swung doors. Kit, the stable boy, was sleeping out front, his chair tilted back against the barn's wall, his battered hat shading his eyes. In contrast, at Tex Hosmer's livery, just down the street, activity hummed. A group of saddlers was just being taken out. A rich supply of hay was being loaded into an upper mow by windlass. Near the office, a man in a beaver topper was counting out greenbacks to Tex, the stable owner.

"Yeah," agreed Liam. "There's plenty cash around. And everybody seems to be making it—except me." Liam turned, as if in sudden desperation, to the plump Bowron. "What's the matter, Flash?" he pleaded. "They say the people down here are friendly. Do I smell bad? Here I been in Tularosa nigh on to a year, strugglin' to make a go of things. You'd think I was still a stranger."

Flash Bowron was silent a moment. Then, "You'll be havin' friends; plenty friends. Be patient, redhead." He clapped Liam on the shoulder again. "It just takes time for people to warm up. But they will. After all, you got to realize that when a stranger comes into town, they don't know who he is. For all they know, he may be an outlaw—or anything." Bowron added as an afterthought, as he turned back into the saloon, "Anyway, the town may not be quite big enough for two liveries."

"Big enough?" Liam said to the gambling man's back. "We got two newspapers in the town. We sure can stand two liveries."

Liam Ogelthorpe worked his hands deeper in his serge pockets and walked down the street. He felt the wallet where his last thirty dollars had been. He'd hoped to run up that cash into a stake that would have kept him going a little while yet, paid off his most urgent bills. Now . . .

Liam pulled in his wide leather belt a notch, tight to his thinning middle. Pete Rippey, a cowman hardly older than Liam's twenty-five, drove by in a highly-waxed rig with glinting red wheels, nodded to Liam. Pete Rippey could afford to smile, Liam thought. They said Rippey had shipped two thousand head of quality Herefords, the day before. At even thirty dollars a head, that figured to $60,000!

Sam Zapf, a young timber merchant, went by in the opposite direction on a big lumber freighter drawn by four huge, fat-bellied bays. Sam rode, unpretentiously, beside the drayman. The chaingirt freighter was loaded with a pyramidal pile of raw logs. Yellow pine. Mine stopes were hungry for timber these days, paying fancy prices for it.

Passing the Eakins saddlery, Liam saw a pretty, dimpled, blonde girl he'd seen around town many times before. Shy, he'd never learned her identity. But she was so dazzling, sight of her always hurt Liam inside with a tight ache of loneliness. She was wearing a maize dress now, with buffont skirt,

the hem of which was set off by a black border. Her shawl and bonnet matched her dress.

Liam recognized the sporty young fellow with whom she talked. Gil Colburn's dad was affluently connected with the Santa Fe stage lines, which were prospering despite a rash of holdups. Gil seemed to be pointing out to the dimpled blonde girl an extravagantly expensive, silver mounted, beautifully chaised saddle on display in the shop window.

But then Liam saw the poster card near the saddle, and he knew it was to the card Gil was pointing. The card announced a social and dance to be held on the coming Saturday night at the schoolhouse.

Liam gritted his teeth. A prospering young fellow like Gil could easily enough get a pretty girl like this blonde one to go to a party with him. But what chance had an outsider, and a struggling one at that? Liam had gone to one of those school socials. He was completely familiar with the clannish way in which the townsfolk held to their own little circles.

A lanky, rawboned man with hunched shoulders and sagging jaw met Liam at the livery. There was mud on his boots. He was Swede Swanson, a farmer from the Bottoms.

"How about it?" the Swede demanded. "How about paying me for that timothy today—like you promised?"

LIAM reached into one pocket, then another. From under the buttoned flap of his shirt the young redhead finally brought out his last remaining coin. He handed it to the Swede.

The Swede stared at the coin. Then with an angry yelp he slammed the coin to the ground.

"No! I'm not takin' a damn fifty cents." The farmer grabbed suddenly for Liam's collar. "By jimminy, I got sixteen dollars comin' to me for that hay!"

Young Liam moved faster than the Swede farmer. His right hand fastened on the Swede's right wrist. His left snagged the Swede's elbow. Right leg forward, Liam twisted. The Swede flew through the air, hit the ground, lay sprawled on his back.

Liam turned into the livery, pushing by two strangers who'd left their mounts with him the night before. The taste was bad in Liam's mouth. He didn't want to wait for the Swede to renew the combat. He hadn't wanted to hurt the Swede. The poor farmer, he knew, was more than half right.

The strangers came inside after Liam, and Liam saw that Kit was getting their mounts.

"He sure looked wild an' spooky," he heard one whisper to the other.

"That redhead's no sugar-eater," conceded the second.

Liam did not let on he'd heard their comments. The double-rigged saddle with the short, hard-twist rope showed the first speaker was not from the south. The other also had a Miles City rigging on his big-bottomed gelding. A 30-30 carbine angled up from under his rosardero and a sixgun was in his belt. Little kindness was in the thin-dark faces of either of the men.

Liam told the men that their mounts had been grained just as they'd requested, took the money they offered in payment.

The taller of the two men eyed Liam cautiously. "You ain't a native of these here parts," he ventured.

"What makes you say that?"

"You got a drawl. You don't talk sharp and cracklin', like bacon fryin', the way they do down here."

"I always thought they had a drawl down here," Liam said, his bluntness ending the stranger's attempt at con-

versation.

Through a window, he watched them ride off, sitting straight up and down in the saddle, from head to feet. That was the way Liam rode, and despite the sharp hardness of the men he could not help feeling kinship to them. They were from northern range. They did things the way he did. Here in the south, men rode well back in the saddle, with their stirrups held far forward. It was rougher country. Even the saddles, as a consequence, were different.

Liam went to the door of the livery. The Swede was just finishing dusting his clothes off. Liam called to him, beckoned. The Swede came slowly, reluctantly.

Liam flipped the five-dollar gold piece the two northerners had just given him in payment. The Swede caught the coin, looked at it, then at Liam.

Liam turned. His action in payment spoke for itself. He went back into his livery office, sat down at his desk. He shoved a disordered pile of bills, impaled on a prong file, to one side, unlocked a drawer.

He took out his bank book, studied its figures for a long time, tried to see where his money had gone.

Again and again his fingers combed his red hair that was forever tumbling across his brow. He was no longer seeing the figures. He was thinking of the range north of the Wyoming line. He thought of the bitter cold winter, two years ago, he had spent running mustangs up there, taking his share of wild ones as wages. He had traded them for good stock and set up here. He had imagined, then, that he would like this yucca country of the south, where lizards stayed out all winter. He had thought it would be nice, for a while, to trade the tall grass for sage and buckbrush. . . .

Liam stood up, moved to the door. Night purpled the San Andreas to the west. A group of riders thundered by, apparently on the way to their respective ranches. Activity was brisk down the street at Tex Hosmer's stable. Men drifted home to houses whose lights were beginning to blink out of the gloom.

He could sell a horse, Liam thought, get enough so he could hang on here with his livery a while longer.

But he thought of the blonde girl and a deep sense of aloneness settled over him.

SEVERAL days later, the sound of building hammers and saws brought Liam to the door of his livery. He saw men at work laying the foundation for a new building in an empty lot just beyond the Santa Fe stage station.

Liam watched, idly listening to the drive of the hammers. The first slow, long drives, then the final staccato ones as each nail was driven home. Then he saw Flash Bowron cross over from the Land Office saloon. The plump saloon owner beamed.

"How you like it, redhead?" he inquired proudly. "A new casino. I'm putting it up."

Liam studied Bowron carefully. He knew the man indulged in shady dealings, that he occasionally was guilty of things bordering on lawbreaking. Flash Bowron wasn't very well liked in town, in fact he was actively disliked. Yet he was certainly prospering.

"You're doing plenty all right," Liam said.

Liam saw his flattery touch off a glow in the saloonman's face. He then idled on to where an aproned carpenter was at work on a mitre box. He watched interestedly as the man measured off the box's angles. This new casino was going to be a large place.

Liam heard his name called. He turned. Bowron was gesturing to him

with the tilt of his head. Liam went up to the ample-waisted man.

"How would you like a job?" Bowron asked. His voice dropped to a confidential tone. "How'd you like to make some real dinero?"

"How'd I like to make some dinero?" Liam chuckled grimly. "I was just thinking of chucking everything for the Argentine. I understand they like Americans down there on the big ranches as *major-domos.*"

"My dough might help you get down there," Bowron offered. His eyes crinkled slyly. "It won't take you any time at all and you'll have a hundred dollars in your poke."

A hundred dollars! But Liam caught the ready assent on his tongue. The doubt flashed in his brain that Bowron wouldn't be offering that kind of mazuma if the job was on the up-and-up! Liam's yellow-speckled gray eyes were wary. Still, people were all around. And Bowron was making his offer in broad daylight.

"It's this way, Liam," Bowron said hastily. Liam noticed it was the first time Bowron had ever addressed him by his given name. "I need cash for financing my building. Cash at easy interest. I can't get it here in Tularosa at my terms, yet the local town-fathers would raise holy hell if I were to bring in any capital from the outside."

The saloon-owner's eyes shuttled as if to ascertain that no one overheard. "But I am bringing capital in from outside," he said then. "And it's got to be secret."

Bowron lapsed into silence. He did not speak again until Liam finally prompted, "Yeah. So what's the setup?"

"I need someone I can trust. Bank messengers from Roswell are bringing in five thousand dollars tonight. It's obvious I can't have them come into town, and be seen. And I don't want to be seen contacting them myself. So I arranged with them to have a messenger meet them just ten miles out, at Devil's Gate, and pick up what they're bringing."

Liam considered. With a hundred dollars in the pot, Flash Bowron probably wasn't telling everything about the deal. There must be some petty crookedness in it somewhere. But on the other hand, perhaps it was just as Bowron said. And a hundred dollars. . . .

"Keeno," Liam said, in sudden decision. "What do I do?"

"You got a stout horse? And you'd better be well armed—to protect the money."

Liam started from town just as dark powdered down. Riding along the street, he saw the pretty blonde girl whom sporty Gil Colburn had been talking to the other day in front of the saddlery. She apparently was in town now to do some shopping at the Mercantile.

Seeing her, a glow of cheer warmed Liam. Perhaps things were starting to break his way. Yes, he believed that. The hundred dollars he was getting was only the beginning of brighter things to come.

LIAM was whistling softly when he came to Devil's Gate, the place where he was to meet the bank messengers from Roswell and take the money they were bringing for Flash Bowron. The 'Gate' was a notch in a wall of buff and purple rocks on the little spur desert trail.

Liam paused, doffed his hat to comb back his carrot mop with his fingers. Above him, stars twinkled like amber and topaz gems. Off on a ridge a bird cried mournfully. All was silence and peace. And then it happened.

Off distantly, the unmistakable, quick patter of gunfire rose. Liam straightened abruptly, holding tight the reins of his

bay mount. He stared into the dark, his ears straining. First, it was no more than a whisper. Then, out of that whisper, grew the rising clatter of horses' hooves!

Liam thought, "The stage! Over that way is the stage trail!" Had those shots meant the stage was being held up?

Before Liam could spur his bay ahead in that direction, two riders materialized out of the dark. They thundered down on him.

They swerved at sight of Liam, slid their lunging, wild-eyed horses to their haunches and to a stop. The bigger of the two men swung a small, black bag toward Liam. Liam recognized the men then. They were the two dark-faced strangers who'd been at his livery three, four days back, who'd given him the five dollar piece which he'd given in turn to the Swede!

"Take the bag, Montany!" the big man shouted. "Ride like damnation! That blasted stage brought along an armed escort!"

He whirled his mount, dust swirling up from prancing, wild hooves. The second gun-hung rider crowded his heels.

Liam clutched the bag. Lightning fast, he debated, his eyes staring wide as the two riders lined down a wash, out of sight. Sound of other riders approaching removed any doubts that were in his mind. He should have known Bowron wouldn't pay out a hundred dollars for nothing. Those two fleeing Bowron riders were outlaws! And coming now was the stage's armed escort, pursuing them!

Liam looped the black bag over his short saddlehorn with his right hand. His left tore back at his reins, whirling his mount. He sent the animal down the scrabbly wash, raking his rowelless spurs.

In the half-dark, the stirred up dust of the two outlaw riders was plainly visible. But Liam cursed bitterly, knowing they had outdistanced him.

Then he met them head-on, as they backtracked frantically out of a blind coulee!

Liam shouted a command to halt. They answered with a curse. Liam fired his sixgun at the dark splotches the riders made in the dark.

Their gun-lightning ripped back at him. Liam leveled carefully, dropped the smaller rider. The other scrambled for the shelter of a rock pinnacle. A slug chipped Liam's elbow. He would have made good his next shot, but his bay chose that moment to crow-hop, whinneying in terror as a bullet hit it.

The scrambling outlaw's horse bolted beyond the rock upthrust into the clear again. A double burst from Liam brought the outlaw down.

Liam heard the vanguard of the pursuing posse. He jockeyed up to where the outlaw had just fallen, grotesquely sprawled in death. The other was draped lifelessly in a catclaw bush ten yards off. Liam unslung the black money bag, dropped it beside this second dead outlaw, putting the evidence of guilt where it belonged:

"Ogelthorpe!"

The name was shouted by a posse rider who'd outdistanced the rest of his party. The rider's gun slapped flatly. A bullet droned by. Liam recognized the rider. Young Gil Colburn—whose dad bossed the stage line!

"Colburn — !" Liam began. He wanted to explain.

A HAIL of lead from Colburn was the answer. Colburn was out for blood. He wouldn't give him a chance to talk, having already convicted him in his mind.

Liam swore, reined away. He dodged in and out through the boulders dotting the bottom of the trough. He short-cutted back toward the trail. A second

of the posse riders crossed the trough fifty yards ahead, turned into it, blocked him.

No other escape remained except directly up the steep slants on either side. But if he went that way, Liam realized, he would sky-light himself for any posse riders coming into the trough. Liam swerved to avoid the rider ahead. But then Liam recognized the rider's fleshy bulk.

"Bowron! Damn you, Bowron!" Liam swore, heading directly for the pouch-waisted, fancy-vested man. "What kind o' murder trap you run me into?"

"Easy, Liam!" Bowron looked about quickly, as a dislodged, clattering rock on the slant made him think, momentarily, some other member of the posse might be approaching. His whisper was harsh, nervous. "I didn't do nothing."

"Didn't do nothing? You call it nothing, tricking me into doing your dirty work for you? Figgered that I'd bring in your stolen cash for you and yore own hands would be clean, huh? That if I was caught, well—then it would be my neck? An' it looks like you even had the crust to ride with the money-stage's escort, to see there was no slip-up. Well, you figgered wrong, Bowron. I'm taking you back into town with me —as my prisoner!"

Flash Bowron's laugh pierced the night like icy wind. "Smooth yore hackles, fella. Maybe you better get it straight who's takin' in who." He lowered his voice, as if to guard against the chance any posse rider might approach and hear. "And maybe I'll get my dinero even though you spoiled my play. Maybe there's a little reward out for stage robbers. It's yore word against mine, Liam. Who you think they'll believe if I tell 'em it's you who's the third gunie in this little Montana stage-robbin' outfit?"

He laughed again, and the starlight glinted on his gun.

Apprehension held Liam rigid. Could he prove he had no part in this robbery —if Bowron were to swear otherwise? The answer to that was plainly *no*. And Bowron blocked his escape now, was about to take him prisoner.

Liam continued to hesitate. But the clatter of another rider approaching galvanized him into action. He plunged his bay mount directly at the suet-waisted saloon man.

Bowron's blasting fire burned at Liam, but Liam struck Bowron's mount squarely. Liam's bay faltered, lurched as Bowron's horse went down beneath its lashing hooves.

Liam rocked in the saddle, but held tight. Weak and shaken, he pointed the bay across rocky terrain into the clear.

The bay's breath came in a gurgling rasp. The animal missed stride. Liam forced it on. He knew if he stopped now, it would never go on again. But still he couldn't run away. That would put the brand of outlaw forever on his name. Yet would not going back to Tularosa do that just as indelibly?

On a patch of hardpan, the wounded bay dropped out from under Liam. It was dead before it hit.

Liam unsaddled the dead animal. Some distance away, he cached the saddle in the brush. A nicked elbow was a wet jell of blood against Liam's shirtsleeve. He walked on, his gait uncertain. He was hardly more than a half dozen miles from town now.

Several times he narrowly avoided the searching possemen. Once, when he stopped under the cover of a plank bridge to rest, and bathe his wounded elbow, riders passed so close to him, he was afraid they might hear his breathing.

He entered town from the south end. Not until he saw the people running, hurrying along its street, was he aware that some unusual excitement had grip-

ped Tularosa. Everyone was going in one direction. Men, women, children—yelping dogs.

Liam heard someone call a question from a raised window. And the answer,

"The livery. Somebody's torched his damned livery!"

LIAM'S eyes jerked upward to the sky. His heart lurched. Flickering, undulating fingers of flame grew higher against the north horizon.

"The blasted fool!" he heard another voice yell. "He deserves getting his place burned down. He deserves worse'n that fer what he did!"

"We're runnin' him outen town on a pine stick when we find him. We don't want the—"

The rest of it was lost to Liam. He could not swallow past the bitter lump in his throat. Then resentment, suspicion, loneliness—all the things that had rankled within him for so long—burst in sudden unbounded fury.

The horses—the stock in the livery! Were they mad? To torch the big barn with all its livestock was worse than crazy. It was inhuman!

Liam's hand slapped for his gun.

The crowd milling in the street was a wall before him. He plunged through it to the blazing structure. Then Liam stopped, frozen.

The barn was a raging furnace of crackling orange and yellow flames. Fire glimmered through the cracks and spaces of its walls. Flames raced upward along the eaves and roof beams of the ghastly, fire-eaten silhouette.

One thing was wrong in the nightmare. Liam's lips moved in an almost involuntary whisper. "The barn. It—it's *Hosmer's!* It's not—"

"Sure, and whose barn did you think it would be?" a voice spoke at his shoulder.

Liam turned, looked into young Gil Colburn's tensely smiling, fire-lit face.

Bewildered, Liam paused momentarily. Then he made a move to dart into the flaming structure.

Hands grabbed him, pulled him back. His frantic struggling was futile.

"The horses!" he gasped. "No matter whose barn—"

"You fool!" someone answered. "There's no stock in there! You think we'd o' torched the place without first seeing to that?"

"But who—? Why—?" Perplexity twisted Liam's face. Hadn't he implicated himself in the stage robbery? Their rage should be directed against him. "Why burn Hosmer's livery?"

Liam felt the crowd move closer about him. A few men slapped him on the back.

"Tryin' t' act innocent, huh?" . . . "Runnin' off without tryin' to get credit, were yuh?" . . . "Gil Colburn here told us all about Bowron's dirty crooked work!"

"Wha-at?"

"Gil Colburn sneaked up on you and Bowron talking out at Devil's Gate. Colburn heard enough to make it all clear. How you plugged Bowron's two stage-stoppers and—"

Liam still stared uncomprehendingly.

Sam Zapf, the lumberman, clapped him on the shoulder. "Hosmer don't own that burnin' stable," he said. "Don't you know that? It's just another one of the things Bowron had his finger in. Why'd you think everybody kow-towed to Bowron? Why'd you think they patronized his stable?"

"Because Bowron was biddin' fair to strangle the town!" a square-bearded farmer finished. "Bowron's crooked work just about made him top-dog around here, but he overstepped the line just once too often!"

LIAM saw the pretty, dimpled blonde girl whose name he'd never learned. She smiled at him. But too much was

on Liam's mind for him to return her smile. Gil Colburn had heard Flash Bowron's self-admitted guilt and had brought the word back to town. At one stroke, the townspeople expressed their anger at Bowron and their appreciation to the redheaded stranger, whose livery they had never patronized, by burning down Bowron's barn. But would this finish a crafty article like Bowron, Liam wondered. Would he quit without first seeking revenge?

A prosperous-looking townsman whom Liam had never met, grabbed Liam's coatsleeve. "I'd like to express my gratitude by having you over to the house for dinner some night. How about tomorrow night? We been waitin' a long time for someone to trip Bowron bloody-handed thisaway!"

A local merchant called, "Hereafter, my horses go to your livery, Ogelthorpe."

His announcement was echoed by half a dozen others.

"Thanks," Liam said. "Thanks." His smile was tense as he turned away.

Sam Zapf followed after him, taking his arm. "What's the matter, Ogelthorpe? Something wrong?"

"No, nothing," said Liam. "I'll be back. There's just something I have to attend to."

He strode off toward the darkness. The crowd held back, wonderingly.

Liam walked to his livery. He was reaching for the saddle on the stall's side wall, when a familiar voice spoke his name.

Liam turned slowly, saw the gun in the pouch-waisted gambler's hand. "You saved me the trouble of going out to look for you, Bowron. I figgered maybe you would be back—but not quite so soon."

Bowron's clothes were dusty. His face contorted with dark fury. "You're the cause of all this," he accused. "You think I'd leave here, an' you alive?"

The gun flashed in his hand. It spoke almost in the same motion.

The first slug knocked Liam back against the stable wall. The second, striking his shoulder, stopped his own move for his gun. Slowly, his back against the wall, he slid down toward the straw-matted floor.

"Bowron!" he called, weakly.

Bowron was disappearing through the livery's rear entrance. He turned slightly at the sound of his name.

The gun that Liam had dragged from his holster blasted once, redly.

Bowron's hands lifted slowly. He teetered backwards, stumbling. Then his body fell to the floor.

The crowd surged into the livery before the gun-echoes died. Liam looked up into a blur of faces hovering above him. The first Liam recognized was that of the man who had invited him for dinner.

"Bullet-nicks! Just scratches!" the man was exclaiming, examining Liam's wounds. "Here, who's got a shirttail for a bandage?"

THERE was a ripping sound. Liam blinked his eyes, and he saw the pretty blonde girl above him. She was ripping a bandage from her petticoat. When she bent down to him again, Liam thought he could manage a smile. She smiled back.

"Who are you?" he asked. "I—I've always wanted to know."

"Her?" The man of the dinner invitation answered for her. "Don't you know *her?* Why, this is my datter—Hester! Hester, meet Liam Ogelthorpe, a gent who done saved us from a thievin', robbin'—"

But Liam wasn't listening any more. Hester was squeezing his hand with hers. Maybe Tularosa wasn't such an unfriendly place after all.

Only it had taken a devil of a lot of trouble to get really acquainted!

THE GUN GHOST

DRAMATIC FEATURE-LENGTH RANGE-MYSTERY NOVEL

By WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER

It was a phantom killer terrorizing this trail town all right, Dusty Miles allowed that.... What Dusty failed to savvy was why a back-shooting ghost that used real bullets could not be dealt plain, old-fashioned hot lead justice!

And then the thunder and flame of powdersmoke tore the place apart!

CHAPTER I

UNSEEN TERROR

DUSTY MILES was well named. It was an unusual evening that did not find him, his drummer's wagon, and his team of bays well-covered with dust and a good many miles behind him. In that respect tonight was no different from hundreds of other nights that lay behind him. Dusty was tired, his team was tired, his wagon seemed to creak with weariness. The long drive south from Smoky Butte had left its coating of white alkali dust upon man and outfit, but only superficially did this night resemble the other hundreds. There was a lightness in Dusty Miles' heart; a soft whistling of "There'll Be A Hot Time In The

Old Town Tonight" on his lips. This was the night he would see Sally Reed.

Once a year in early summer Dusty swung down across the arid, thinly-settled section of Oregon that lay between the Blue Mountains and the Nevada line, visited with the storekeepers and filled their orders. At times there were settlements Dusty had to miss due to time or the difficulties of travel, but he never missed The Rapids. There was tight-fisted old Charlie Reed who owned the store, the hotel, the toll gate, and a sizable ranch, and who always had gold to pay for what he bought, but it wasn't Charlie or Charlie's gold Dusty was thinking about now as he came down the steep slope north of the lakes. He was thinking of Sally, and he smiled a little ruefully as he remembered how much of his time he'd given to thoughts of Sally since he'd last seen her a year ago.

THERE was a sort of awesome beauty about this place, a beauty that Dusty had found nowhere else in his wide circuit. Here, nestled between the rimrock to the north and the brown southern hills lay Rock Lake and Big Lake, connected by The Rapids which Charlie Reed had bridged and where he had established a toll gate. As Dusty wheeled the length of the mile-long causeway that Charlie had built across the tule-covered swampland to connect the bridge with the high ground to the north, he thought that this was like two, huge blue stones edged in green and set in a great brown frame.

Dusty rattled across the bridge, anxious to get on to the hotel where he'd find Sally, but when he drew up at the gate, he was surprised to see Sally, and not Howdy Gale, step out of the little gatekeeper's house.

"The answer to a year-old dream," Dusty said happily. He climbed down and draped his lank body over the gate. "Here, in this beautiful lake country which is found so unexpectedly at the bottom of a desert valley, one finds something even more beautiful and unexpected: a perfect example of classic feminine pulchritude. If only the ancient Greeks could have had you for a model."

Usually Sally dimpled at Dusty's compliments, and remarked that he was no beauty, that his nose was too long and his chin too sharp, but she didn't now. She said soberly, "How are you, Dusty? It has been a year, hasn't it?"

Dusty blinked. This was not the smiling Sally he had dreamed about with laughing blue eyes and a funny remark. He said, "What's happened to my Sally? Not even a smile for me? This is not justice. This is a great deed of wrong-doing. This is . . . this is . . ." he paused, not finding the right word and feeling the misery that was in the girl, and finally ended lamely with, "This is terrible."

"It will be five dollars for wagon, team, and driver," Sally said as soberly as before.

"And at a time like this," Dusty said, a sudden fear in him that something was horribly wrong, "when her lover returns, she talks of such mundane things as five dollars."

Sally merely nodded, and said nothing, but tears came into her eyes when Dusty asked, "Where's Howdy Gale? I thought he alway kept the gate."

"Howdy won't be here any more," Sally said in a tone that was barely audible.

Dusty saw he'd said the wrong thing. He asked, "How's old Charlie? Is he as superstitious as ever?"

"Will you give me the five dollars?" Sally demanded in sudden anger.

Dusty cuffed back his battered hat, and ran a hand through his dust-colored hair. Something really was wrong. He

decided the less he said the better. He handed her a gold coin, but when she swung the gate open he made no move to get back into the wagon. He couldn't keep from saying, "Look, Sally, if something's wrong, and there's anything I can do, I'd sure . . ."

"There's nothing you can do, Dusty. Just get in your wagon and keep on driving. Make a dry camp somewhere south of here, and keep on going tomorrow."

"And not enjoy the hospitality of The Rapids' Hotel?" Dusty said as if horrified at such a thought. "Not even make my usual summer sale to Charlie?" He turned back to his wagon, and pointed to the words printed on the body. 'Cutlery. Stationery. Fancy dress goods at wholesale prices.' Why Charlie would never forgive me if I let him pass up this opportunity of a lifetime."

"Dad won't buy anything. Drive on, Dusty. Nobody can get past you as long as you're here."

FEAR laid its cold hand upon Dusty, tightening his stomach muscles and filling him with a terrible feeling that some unmentionable tragedy was stalking this oasis. His eyes searched Sally's face, and found no answer to the question that was in him. As he climbed back into the wagon seat and picked up the lines he thought grimly that the one thing he wouldn't do was to drive on and make a dry camp. He said, "Reckon I'm not in such a big hurry, Sally," and drove on.

Dusty turned his team over to the stableman, and went into the hotel. As he signed the register, he saw that the sad-eyed little clerk was a man he had never seen before. He asked, "How long have you been on this job?"

"Almost a week, and I ain't gonna be here much longer." The clerk blinked, wiped a hand across his eyes, and added, "I ain't gonna be here much longer 'cause I'll be dead. If I'd knowed what was wrong down here I'd never have come."

"What is wrong?" Dusty demanded.

"I don't know," the little man whispered. "Nobody knows."

"Then what in hell is biting you? You look like you've been sitting with a ghost."

"Ghost?" The little man began to tremble. He looked cautiously around and then back at Dusty. "Did you see it?"

"Did I see it?" Dusty exploded. "Jumping jeepers, man, what is it?"

"The Phantom Claw," the clerk whispered. "Nobody's seen it, but it's here. It's a new kind of gun-ghost. It's horrible." He pushed a key across the counter. "Your room is number ten, but I'm telling you that you're foolish to stay here. There'll be death before morning just like there was last night."

"Hogwash," Dusty snapped. "Plain, pure hogwash. I sure won't hurry to get away from a Phantom Claw." He paused, eyes narrowing. "What's that about death last night?"

"Howdy Gale was killed by it," the clerk whispered, "right down there by the toll gate."

Old Charlie Reed had been superstitious to the point where it was funny to Dusty. Charlie was always talking about the thirteenth of the month, about going under ladders or finding a pin pointed the wrong way, or ghosts in the tules, but Dusty had always put it down as just another sign of the old man being a little off. Now he swung on his heel, and walked into the store. Charlie Reed was behind the counter, a skinny, stooped man with long bony fingers and a little chin beard that was entirely white. He looked at Dusty, and said, "I don't want nothing, Dusty. No use buying anything when I'm gonna die."

"Why, you'll be living long after I'm

pushing up the daisies," Dusty said jovially. "I've got some mightly fine cutlery, Charlie. It'll go good with the cow ranches around here. The buckaroos can't bite the fork tines in two. I'll guarantee them. And you've got to see my dress goods. Say, these ranchers' wives will beat a path to the door of this store when they hear about what you've got. Now you take my . . ."

"Dusty, I ain't buying a thing. Tonight mebbe I'll be dead. If you stay here mebbe you'll be dead. Don't do it, Dusty. You'd best drive on."

Old Charlie Reed was queer in a lot of ways, but one thing he'd never been queer about, and that was making money. Now he was telling a man to drive on when there was a good profit in the meals Dusty would buy and the room he'd rent.

"You look plumb healthy, Charlie," Dusty said easily. "Now what's this talk about you not buying anything of me? Charlie, did I ever sell you any bad merchandise? Did I ever once misrepresent anything I carried?"

"It ain't that, boy," Charlie said sadly. "I've always been called superstitious. Reckon folks have done worse than that and said I was a locoed old fool, but I reckon they're gonna change their minds. I've allus knowed there was a lot of strange things in this world most people never admitted existed. Now I've got proof. Some kind of a supernatural being calling itself the Phantom Claw has committed murder."

"Never heard of it," Dusty said disdainfully. "In my book murder isn't supernatural. There's always some kind of an ornery human being behind it, and a dose of hot lead will take care of said human being." He drew back his coat and patted the butt of the .45 on his hip. "You show me this Phantom Claw, Charlie, and I'll ventilate him proper."

"Come with me, Dusty," Charlie said, and led the way into a back room. He paused beside a table, and drew back a blanket. "Take a look at that."

IT WASN'T a pretty sight. It was the lifeless body of Howdy Gale, the gatekeeper.

"Reckon he's dead all right," Dusty admitted, "but I don't see a bullet hole. What was it, a knife?"

Charlie replaced the blanket, and wiped his eyes. "Howdy and me came here together. He's worked for me for years. Helped me build that causeway and the bridge. He's been keeping that gate ever since I put it up. It's kind o' like losing part of your family, Dusty. I don't see why a ghost . . ."

"It wasn't a ghost," Dusty said irritably. "I tell you it was some ornery, two-legged coyote. What kind of a weapon was it, I asked you?"

"A weapon that no human would ever use, son," Charlie said sadly. "His skull was caved in. The only other marks on him are three little holes in the top of his head." He laid a torn fragment of paper on the counter. "That was under his hat when we found him, and his hat was on his head. He was lying on the bridge beside the gate. Pete Yager found him early this morning."

Dusty turned the paper so he could read it. On it was scrawled, "The Phantom Claw has struck. It will strike again. Will you be next?"

"Hell," Dusty shouted. "No Phantom Claw would do any writing like that. It was some ornery galoot who's got some dirty scheme up his sleeve to scare the shoes off you, and it sure is working."

There was an ashy color on Charlie's face that added ten years to his appearance. He ran a trembling hand over his eyes. "I feel those things, Dusty. I know what it was. It will come again."

"Then why don't you shut up your

place and get out?" Dusty demanded.

"You can't run away from death," the old man whispered. "It has marked me for its own. The ordinary limits that apply to man and beast do not apply to something like this. Wherever I go it will go."

Dusty swore softly. Charlie Reed was in no condition to be argued with. The evil scheme that had been spawned in some twisted brain was taking advantage of Charlie's well-known superstitions, and it had gone far on the road of success. Dusty had a good guess what was behind it. Years ago Charlie Reed had looked ahead, and had seen the value of the position he had chosen for his home. There was grass along the swampy shores of the lake for hay, there was water, and there was fine summer range on the hills south of the lakes, but the main advantage of Charlie's holdings was the position that he held. Anyone going directly south from Smoky Butte or coming north could save more than one hundred miles of travel by paying toll. By using the bridge and causeway Charlie had built, a traveler could avoid taking the long way around the lakes. More than one man had envied Charlie his business, envied him enough to commit murder.

"One thing you've got no right to do," Dusty said grimly, "is to put Sally out there at the gate. If Howdy ... ."

Dusty's eyes had turned to the window, and what he saw took him out of the store on the run.

CHAPTER II

SHEEPMAN'S HATE

A LONG line of sheep stood in docile quietness along the causeway waiting for the gate to be opened, but that was not what brought Dusty out of the store and racing over the uneven ground to the gate. It was the burly figure of the sheepman, Bill Tulk, standing in front of Sally on the other side of the gate, a big hand roughly gripping her by the shoulder.

Tulk didn't see Dusty come up, nor climb over the gate. Tulk was saying angrily, "I've been held up enough on this road. I ain't paying no ten cents a head to get my sheep across. You go get Charlie Reed . . ."

That was when Dusty grabbed Tulk by the shoulder, whirled him around, and drove a fist to the big man's chin that sent him reeling away from the gate. Tulk, taken completely by surprise, tried to regain his balance and failed because Dusty gave him no chance. He hit the sheepman in the stomach, punched him on the nose, and closed an eye. Tulk's big fists were flaying the air in wild aimlessness. He kept on retreating before Dusty's punishing fists until he reached the edge of the bridge, swayed there a moment as he clawed fiercely for a support that wasn't there, and went off into the water. He came up, shook his head, and swam to the rock causeway. When he scrambled back to the road, and wiped the water out of his eyes, he found himself looking into the muzzle of Dusty's gun.

"I never did like sheepmen," Dusty said hoarsely, "and now I know why. Any jayhoo who'd push a woman around like that ought to have his hide ventilated. If you make a wrong move now, Tulk, that's exactly what I'll do."

Tulk peered at Dusty with his one good eye, wiped a hand over his face again, and growled, "Sure, sure. I'll pay. I ain't arguing with nobody that uses a hogleg to hold me up."

Dusty motioned with his gun. He said coldly, "Dig."

Tulk was still looking at him when he brought a handful of gold coins out

of his pocket. Suddenly recognition broke across his wide face. "You're the drummer, ain't you? Well, you don't need to stop at Picket. That's one store you ain't selling to, and if you come through my range, I'll dust you off with buckshot."

"I'll do my snake stomping when I get to the snakes, Tulk. Keep digging."

"I've got fifteen hundred head of sheep in that band," Tulk muttered, "which means one hundred and fifty dollars. Mighty damned high I say just to go through a gate."

"You could go around," Sally pointed out.

"I've got to get these sheep down to my range or I sure would." Tulk handed Sally the money. "Mebbe someday Charlie Reed won't run this place, which same will be a great day for folks who live down here. Nobody else would charge the kind of rates he does."

"Of course you wouldn't remember the money and work he put into making it possible for you to save a hundred miles, would you?" Dusty demanded.

"He's paid out a long time ago," Tulk snarled. "I've paid him enough myself to more'n make up for whatever he put into it. Now get the gate open."

Dusty and Sally stepped back into the gatekeeper's house as the sheep moved through. Sally laid her hand on Dusty's arm. "Thanks, Dusty."

Dusty acted as if he hadn't heard. He was saying rapturously, "Eyes like deep purple pools holding all the joy of living. Hair as gold as the wheat I saw last summer around Walla Walla before they put the combine on it. Always she is like this, far away as the moon and as beautiful."

"Dusty, did you pay attention to what I said." Sally shook his arm. "I said thank you."

"Oh, you're welcome. That was nothing. Now let's get back to important things. For the last five years I have asked you to marry me and see the world from the seat of a drummer's wagon. Always you have said no, but now I have thought of another way to ask you. Tonight when the moonlight is on the lakes, I think you will say yes."

Sally looked out of the window into the swift waters of The Rapids as it flowed under the bridge. She said tonelessly, "Tonight when the moonlight is on the lakes the Phantom Claw will strike again, and somebody will die. Dad thinks he will be the one."

Dusty threw up his hands. "Sally, do you believe that stuff?"

SLOWLY the girl turned, and when she looked at Dusty he saw she was filled with the same fear that had been in Charlie Reed and the little hotel clerk. She said simply, "You weren't here last night, Dusty. Just before we went to bed there was the most horrible moan I have ever heard. It couldn't have been anything human. We looked out of the window, and there was some kind of a light on the other side of Rock Lake. I don't know what it was, but it looked as if it was on the lake. I . . . I thought the lake was on fire."

Dusty scratched his chin thoughtfully. If he'd heard that from Charlie Reed he'd have thought it some more of the old man's crazy makebelieve stuff, but he couldn't think that when he heard Sally say it.

"I reckon water don't make a real good fire," Dusty said slowly.

"I know you think I'm crazy, but that's the way it looked. Then this morning Pete Yager found Howdy dead out there," she motioned toward the bridge, "and that note. I suppose Dad told you?"

Dusty nodded. "It's some kind of a game, Sally, to get you and Charlie out of here. There's a way to account for everything, but it may take a little time

and watching. I reckon I'll be around for a spell. Now about this marrying. I . . ."

"No, Dusty I can't leave Dad, and he won't leave here. If you would be satisfied to stay here and help us run this business, I . . . I . . ." Sally stopped as if she had said more than she intended to.

"I don't just reckon this kind of business would suit me. I was born with fiddle feet and I've still got them."

"Would that be any life for a woman?" Sally demanded. "Sitting up on the seat beside you with the heat and dust and the wind in the summertime, and the cold and snow in winter? Did you ever think of that, Dusty?"

"Well, no," Dusty admitted, "but you sure wouldn't have a home if you stayed here a million years. Old Howdy had more home out here tending to the toll gate than you've got in the hotel."

"I guess he did." Sally turned away again, and murmured, "The sheep are about over."

"Now that Charlie's having this trouble, maybe he will sell and move."

"No," Sally said. "Not while this is going on and not until we know what's behind it."

"Who's staying at the hotel?" Dusty asked.

"There's just one man named Thane Silvers. I don't know much about him except that he likes Martha's cooking, and he says he's here for his health."

Bill Tulk loomed in the open doorway. He was still wet and cold, and hatred was a bitter passion in him. "Drummer boy," he said ominously, "I'm sure as hell hoping I'll see you somewhere again. I ain't gonna forget you shoved me into the creek and threw a gun on me. I'll get you sure as God put ornery sons like you on this here earth."

"Now's a good time, Tulk," Dusty said cheerfully. "You're packing a gun. Never put off until tomorrow what you can do today. Ever hear that, Tulk?"

"I'm cold and I'm wet and I'm getting pneumonia," Tulk snarled, "so I'll put it off, and I'll sure relish the idea in my thinking."

"Stop at the hotel and get supper," Sally said. "You can dry your clothes."

"I won't be beholden to no Reed, male or female," Tulk snapped, and turning away, followed his sheep.

"A fine specimen," Dusty said thoughtfully. "Now maybe he's the one making this trouble. He's sure got a headful of cussedness in him."

Sally stepped out of the house and closed and locked the gate. "Let's have supper, Dusty," she said. "If anybody else comes through, they can call us."

A freighter had pulled up in front of the stable, and as Dusty walked by with Sally he recognized the squat figure of Windy Brown. He called, "Howdy, Windy."

The freighter lifted his head, gave a surly nod, and kept on unhitching his horses.

"What's the matter with him?" Dusty asked. "I never saw Windy when he couldn't grin and be real friendly. All this meanness down here must be catching."

"Windy got mad when he went south," Sally said. "Howdy made him pay double on account of his load, and he didn't like it."

"Mebbe you can't really blame Windy," Dusty murmured, and turned toward his wagon.

DUSTY got his valise, and went up to his room. As he took off his shirt and washed the dust from his hands and face, he was thinking how that long before he'd ever come to The Rapids he had heard of old Charlie's two outstanding characteristics: his superstitions and his love of money. It was these two things which had finally

caught up with him. There was plenty of courage in old Charlie Reed if he were fighting something he could see, if this Phantom Claw were a tangible creature upon which he could lay his sights, but Charlie was convinced that it was some horrible monster from another world and there was nothing he could do to fight it.

Somebody was doing a grim and murderous piece of play-acting, and all this business of the horrible moaning and fire on the lake was nothing more than bits of stage scenery to play upon Charlie's superstitious fears. Howdy Gale's death might be more of the same to give the last and final touch to the grim drama that was being enacted.

Dusty put on a clean shirt, and sat down on the bed. He rolled a smoke, touched a match to it, and sat thinking about this strange pattern of horror upon which he had stumbled. For all of Charlie Reed's good points, and they were many, it was his love of money which had brought this upon him. No one had ever heard of him banking his profits. On several occasions when he had made large purchases from Dusty he had disappeared and been gone for some time before he had returned with the gold to pay for what he had bought.

Whoever was behind this scheme to drive Charlie Reed from The Rapids, might think he could find the gold it was commonly believed Charlie had buried. Or it might be an effort to secure for a small price the most profitable business in this section of Oregon. Again, and Dusty gave this motive much thought, it might be an effort to secure revenge for the years of high rates Charlie had charged at the toll gate and the many injustices, some fancied and some real, which those high rates had wrought.

When Dusty went down for supper, Windy Brown, the little hotel clerk, and Sally were already at the table. As Dusty moved around Charlie to a vacant chair another man came in. Sally introduced him as Thane Silvers. He shook hands with Dusty and Brown, sat down, and immediately began to eat in the manner of a man who was completely separated from the world about him.

It was, Dusty thought, a strange group,, and over them lay an equally strange air of feverish expectancy. Charlie Reed did not eat. As he toyed with his food, his fork shook in his hand. His black eyes held the fanatical glow of a man who feels that the web of an unseen fate from which there is no escape is closing in upon him.

The little hotel clerk was filling his mouth with one huge bite after another as if interested only in getting his supper and leaving. Windy Brown, usually full of belly laughs and big tales, was saying nothing, but from under bushy brows his gray eyes were never long away from Charlie. He was, Dusty thought, like a fat dog patiently watching an enemy move toward self-destruction. Sally, too, was watching her father, eyes blue pools of worry, fear of the unknown deep in her.

Of all the people at the table Thane Silvers seemed to be the most unnatural for the very reason that he was acting in what was probably his normal manner. He was a tall man in his early thirties, dressed in the conventional black garb of a gambler, long-fingered and lean-faced with the dark, expressionless eyes of a man who would never, under any circumstances, give away the hand he held until the cards were played. A gun in a shoulder-holster bulged under his coat, and it was Dusty's hunch that the man would be deadly fast and accurate with it.

There had been this long interval of silence with no sound but human breathing, Windy Brown's chomping of food,

and the whisper of dishes being lifted from the table and replaced, a silence that was suddenly and violently broken by the little hotel clerk who slammed a fist against the table in a blow that rattled the dishes. He shrieked, "The Phantom Claw is here in this room with us waiting to kill again, and we sit eating as if nothing was wrong."

Charlie laid down his fork gently. He said very calmly, "If it is here, it is here. That's all. It is a visitor we did not invite, and cannot expel."

"I won't sit here," the clerk screamed, "with that thing in the room. I'm getting out." He rose, sent his chair crashing against the wall with a backward kick, and ran out of the dining room.

CHARLIE got up, the corners of his mouth quivering as he tried to smile at Sally. "I can't eat tonight, Sally. I'm going back to the store."

For a moment Sally sat without motion, eyes meeting Dusty's, alarm for her father bright in them. Then she rose, and followed him out of the room.

"I've been around some damn fools in my time," Thane Silvers said irritably as he reached for the meat platter, "but this outfit ties anything I ever ran into. That Charlie Reed's a crazy old woman. Phantom Claw! Fire on the lake! Moaning sounds at night! Hell's bells, to let him tell it you'd think we was somewhere in another world."

Windy Brown guffawed. "He's loco, all right. Always has been, but he's sure got us where it hurts on that toll gate of his."

"Murder's real enough, Silvers," Dusty said, eyes pinned on the man's lean face.

"Sure." Silvers shrugged. "The way I get it there are folks who have got good reasons to do some killings around here."

"You didn't hear the moaning last night?" Dusty asked. "Or see the fire on the lake?"

"Hell no," Silvers snorted. "I went to bed, and nothing woke me up. I'm not a sound sleeper, either, so if there had been anything to that horrible moaning they were talking about, I'd have heard it."

"I dunno what went on here last night," Windy Brown said thoughtfully, "and I ain't one to believe in this stuff about spirits and such, but just the same, old Charlie Reed has piled it on mighty heavy with them rates he's charged."

Dusty pushed back his chair. He was the audience. Silvers was pretending he had heard nothing last night; insinuating that most of what Charlie and Sally had said happened last night was only in their imagination. Windy Brown was suggesting Charlie deserved any punishment coming that fell to him.

"I came here for quiet," Silvers was saying. "Wanted to get to a dry climate and get built up again, but hell, I'll be a wreck if I stay here."

"You could leave," Dusty suggested.

"Leave this woman's cooking?" Silvers asked. "No, my friend, I'll put up with a lot of hokus pocus for the sake of the meals I get here."

As Dusty left the dining room the notion grew in him that the relationship between Thane Silvers and Windy Brown was something more than appeared on the surface.

CHAPTER III

The Monster In The Tules

SALLY and her father were in the store when Dusty went in. With them was a sour-faced buckaroo, Pete Yager, who had come up the trail

from Nevada along with Charlie and Howdy Gale. Now that Howdy was dead, Yager was the oldest employee Charlie had. He gave Dusty a quick, hostile glance, and kept on talking.

"The boys are plumb boogery, Charlie," Yager was saying. "I haven't told you this, thinking you had enough to worry you, but I reckon you'd better know. We heard that moaning racket over at the ranch, too. Along about midnight. We laid in bed a spell, all of us scared out of our drawers, I reckon. Then we pulled on our pants, got our Winchesters, and took a look around. We didn't find nothing, but when we came back there was a knife driven into the door of the bunkhouse. It was holding a piece of paper that said the Phantom Claw was going to haunt the lakes."

"Have you got that paper?" Dusty asked.

Yager nodded, and drew a folded paper from his pocket. Dusty took it, and said, "Charlie, let me take a look at the one you've got."

"It's no use, son," Charlie said hopelessly. "I told you there was no chance in fighting this kind of thing."

"Let him see it, Dad," Sally said.

Charlie shrugged, moved behind the counter, and tossed the paper on the counter top. Dusty laid the one Yager had given him beside it. Both were torn fragments of brown wrapping paper, and the scrawled words were undoubtedly written by the same hand and the same plunt, soft lead. Dusty folded both papers, and put them into his pocket. He said, "Charlie, if you'll ever get it into your noggin you've got some human devil at work here, maybe we'll get somewhere. After hearing what Pete had to say, I've got another idea. You've got a nice bunch of steers feeding along the lake, haven't you?"

Yager nodded. "The best in the country. They'd be ripe picking for some outfit, and if they could get 'em over into the broken country around Copper Mountain, we'd have a hell of a time getting 'em back."

"That might be exactly what's behind all this, Dad," Sally said earnestly. "Pete, will the boys stay?"

"After what happened to Howdy," Yager answered dully, "I wouldn't be sure."

"Where was Silvers when all this stuff was going on?" Dusty asked.

"In bed," Sally answered. "He always goes to bed early. He says this altitude makes him sleepy."

"But there's no way of knowing whether he stayed in bed, is there?"

"No," Sally admitted.

Dusty built a smoke, thinking about Silvers and Windy Brown, and giving thought, too, to what Yager had said about the buckaroos. Somehow it didn't make a pattern. He couldn't see either Silvers or Brown or the sheepman, Bill Tulk, in the role of cattle rustler. Still, it was a point to be considered. Then he took a wild shot. He asked, "Charlie, have you had any offers to buy out, lock, stock, and barrel?"

Charlie looked surprised. He shot a glance at Sally, swallowed, and put his gaze on Dusty. "Come to think of it, I did. It was from some syndicate in California wanting me to put a price on everything I own. I never answered it."

"Maybe you'd be smart if you did," Yager growled.

"This little jigger you've got running the hotel, Charlie. Where'd you get him?"

Yager jerked a thumb at Dusty. "What's this drummer getting so nosy about, Charlie? Looks to me like this is our business and none of his put in."

Charlie sighed. "I don't know why he's nosy, Pete. He's got the notion somebody who wants me out of here is

behind all our trouble. He . . . he just don't know."

"He might be right," Yager growled. "I'm gonna spend the night in the tules, and if I get my hands on the galoot that puts out the moaning racket, I'll twist his neck"

"You won't twist the neck of the Phantom Claw," Charlie said.

"In case I don't sleep well," Dusty said, "I might do a little roaming around myself. There's one more thing. Let me have that letter you got from the cattle company."

"DAMN your big nose," Yager shouted. "Why don't you tend to your business and let ours alone? That letter ain't no concern of yours. First thing you know you'll have the Phantom Claw cracking your skull."

"In my business," Dusty said, "I've found that it pays mighty well to give other folks a hand when they need it, and Charlie here sure needs it. Besides, I've got a special reason for smoking this Claw jigger out." He looked at Sally and saw that she had missed entirely what he'd said, for her troubled eyes were fixed unwaveringly on her father's white face. "You got that letter handy, Charlie?"

"Yeah, sure. It's right here." Charlie took the envelope from a drawer in his desk, and slid it across the counter to Dusty.

"I sure don't like this," Yager grumbled.

"I didn't get an answer to the question I asked about the little gent in the hotel," Dusty said doggedly. "There's a lot of funny things that have happened lately, and if I can get all the answers I'm guessing they'll lead us to the Phantom Claw."

Charlie didn't answer. He walked to a window, and stood looking at the lake, bright now with the last red rays of the sun upon it. Yager swore fiercely, glared venomously at Dusty for a moment, and then stomped out.

"I'm a little on the slow side," Dusty said, forehead furrowed in a puzzled frown. "What'd I say to kick all that up?"

"There's one more thing you haven't heard," Sally told him. "A week ago today Dad sent Sam Ramson to get some juniper posts on the other side of Rock Lake. You remember Sam?" When Dusty nodded, Sally went on, "Sam had run the hotel for years. He'd been with Dad almost as long as Howdy and Pete. He didn't come back that night. The next day Pete found him in the tules below the rimrock. He was all busted up."

"Howdy and Sam were men your Dad could trust," Dusty said thoughtfully. "Sam meets with an accident and Howdy gets killed by the Phantom Claw. Where was Bill Tulk then?"

Sally nodded. "I'd thought of that, too. He had his sheep on the plateau just beyond the rimrock. Dad said there wasn't any use to call the sheriff in because we couldn't even prove it wasn't an accident."

"When did Windy Brown go south?"

"The day after Sam died."

"This Thane Silvers? When did he show up?"

"He came right after Sam was killed."

"Then all of 'em was in the country or could have been," Dusty mused.

"You don't think he had anything to do with it?"

"Honey," Dusty put a hand under Sally's chin and tilted her face up to his, "I'd hate to say right offhand who had anything to do with it, but it can't be just a coincidence that all of these things and all of these hombres show up about the same time. Maybe one. Maybe two. Not all three. There isn't much doubt about how much Tulk and Brown like your dad, but I can't peg

that Silvers jigger. You say you got this little gent after Sam was killed?"

"Yes. Dad sent Pete into Smoky Butte, and Pete brought him back."

"Sally, I've got a hunch that by morning we'll know more about this business than we know now. If I'm guessing right, I'm the jasper who's going to fetch on a showdown. If I hadn't showed up, they might play along for a day or two more, but a stranger who's bent on sticking his nose into all this Phantom Claw business is either going to get killed or he's going to find out something that'll break this thing fast."

"Dusty, it isn't your trouble," Sally said, her voice betraying the chill despair that was in her. "Why don't you go on like I asked you to? I . . . I don't think I could stand it if something happened to you."

"Honey, that's a real comfort to hear you say that, but I sure won't be traveling on for a day or two. Not till we smoke Mr. Phantom Claw out to where we can see him. Now there's just one thing. You stay inside tonight, and you keep Charlie in."

Dusty grinned at her, a quick, boyish grin that tried to tell her there was nothing at all to worry about, and left the store. It was dusk now, the last thin light of day fleeing swiftly from the darkening earth. As Dusty walked by the stable he saw Windy Brown hunkered down in front of his wagon, whistling softly as if he were entirely at peace with the world.

"Hadn't you better be getting up into your room?" Brown called when he saw who it was, "and locking the door? That Phantom Claw critter might be on the prowl again tonight."

"I'm going out looking for him," Dusty said. "What about you? You don't want your noggin cracked, do you?"

"Why, now," Brown said thoughtfully, "I never give the notion brain room. If that thing's as smart as Charlie thinks it is, it'll know my skull's too hard to crack."

"Windy, did you ever see this Silvers hombre before you pulled in tonight?"

"Silvers?" Brown pulled a plug of tobacco out of his pocket, and bit off a chew. "Silvers? He's the tall galoot who was eating supper with us, ain't he? No sir, Dusty, can't say I ever did."

DUSTY had expected no different answer. If Brown had known the man before and they were operating together, he certainly would not tell the truth. So Dusty waited, giving the freighter time to think about his question, then he said confidentially, "Windy, I think Silvers is the coyote who's been working this murder game. I've got a little document in my pocket that will put the deadwood on him."

Windy chewed for a time, eyes probing the dusk. Finally he said, "Son, you're sure playing with dynamite. Was I you, I'd let Silvers alone. He looks like a tough hand to me."

"I'm a tough hand, too. I can handle that jigger."

"So you're a tough hand, are you, drummer boy," Windy sneered, and spat into the dust. "You'll find Mr. Silvers down there on the bridge. Why don't you go pin that deadwood on him right now?"

"Good idea," Dusty agreed, and walked on.

Dusty wasn't sure whether he had accomplished anything or not. He'd planned to lay a trap, using his life as bait. If Brown and Silvers were together, and he convinced Brown that he did have something on Silvers, they wouldn't be long in playing their next card, and it would be their ace called murder. If, on the other hand, his guess had been wild and wide of the mark,

he might not be doing any good at all. In that case there was nothing he could do to hurry things. There would be more fire on the lake, more moaning sounds, perhaps another killing with the wierd, three-pronged weapon that had smashed life from Howdy Gale, and another note announcing it was the work of the Phantom Claw.

Thane Silvers was leaning on the toll gate, eyes on the dull, blue-black waters of Big Lake. He heard Dusty come up, peered at him until he saw who it was, and turned again to the lake.

"Kind of pretty, Miles," Silvers said reverently. "Just real pretty. I've been watching the shadows come down from the rimrock, and the south hills turn a kind of dark purple. For awhile the sun put a shiny frosting on the lake, and then that went. Look at the tules down there. Listen to the water splashing away on the bridge. Sure is peaceful and pleasant to a man like me."

Dusty had eased his gun in its holster, and he'd been ready for quick and violent action. Now his hand fell away. This was not the sort of talk he'd expected from Silvers. He said, "Yeah, it is pretty. Too bad there's trouble like there is here."

Silvers drew a pipe and tobacco from his pocket, and slowly began to load the pipe. "It is too bad," he agreed, "but I have never seen a bigger fool than Charlie Reed. A man ought to be satisfied with a little and not all of it. He's made his own trouble, and from what I hear, there's plenty of men who might be up to the sort of stuff that's going on here now." He slipped the can of tobacco back into his pocket. Then he added, "Of course you're crazy about the girl. I don't blame you. She's enough to make a man lose his head."

"Charlie has always been fair with me," Dusty said quickly. "He's been crazy about his superstitions all right, and sometimes he drives a pretty hard bargain, but that isn't enough to make a murder." He came closer to Silvers and tried to see his face when he said, "I understand you're here for your health."

Silvers laughed as if he found Dusty's words amusing. "Yes, I've been saying that."

"You look healthy enough," Dusty went on. "It strikes me that this might be a quiet, out-of-the-way place for a man to hide if it got too warm for him somewhere else."

"It would," Silvers agreed.

"Likewise, it strikes me funny that a man would be packing a gun in a shoulder holster if he was here for peace and quiet."

"It is funny." Silvers struck a match, and drew on his pipe, the flame throwing its short-lived light upon his face and bringing out a long-boned, Satanic quality. He held the match another second, dark eyes on Dusty, and then flipped it into the water. "You seem to be taking it on yourself to play detective, Miles. Now that we're speaking of funny things, isn't that a little funny for a drummer?"

"Maybe," Dusty snapped, "but I like Charlie and I'm in love with Sally, which same you've figured out. I'm going to bust this thing, and I'm going to do it before they get Charlie. Now just what are you doing here?"

SILVERS was looking out across the lake again as if he hadn't heard. He said softly, "That sure is pretty. Quiet, too. Just the splash of the water. Nothing else. Maybe a coyote pretty soon up there on the rimrock. Or an owl." He turned back to Dusty. "You know the old man pretty well. You think he'd sell out?"

This was it. This was the motive behind everything that had happened, and again Dusty's hand fell to his gun butt. "I thought so. Silvers, you wrote

a letter to Charlie asking him to put a price on everything he owns, but he never answered. Then you rigged this play so you'd scare him into it."

"I would like to buy him out," Silvers conceded, "and I'd run things different than he does, but I've had no part of this trouble. Before you go on talking like that, you'd better dig up some proof."

"I've got some," Dusty said quickly, and reached for the letter Charlie had given him. Then his hand fell away and he wheeled from Silvers. From somewhere along the tule-lined shore of Rock Lake had come a horrible, moaning sound that was different from anything Dusty had ever heard. He felt a shiver ravel down his backbone, the tightening of his stomach muscles, and he heard himself whispering, "The Phantom Claw."

CHAPTER IV

Death In The Night

FOR a moment neither Dusty nor Silvers spoke. They stood motionless, listening, but the moan did not come again. Then Silvers said softly, "Maybe old Charlie isn't crazy after all. I never heard anything like that before."

"Anything that can make that noise can stop lead," Dusty said, and left the bridge on the run.

As Dusty raced along the road that ran in front of the store and hotel, he was thinking he'd proved one thing at least. It wasn't Thane Silvers who had made the noise. It might be Windy Brown or Bill Tulk or the little clerk or somebody Dusty didn't know. Then Dusty realized that he hadn't proved anything at all because it still might be Thane Silvers who was calling the turn, and the fact that he hadn't made the noise didn't prove he was not one of the conspirators.

Dusty stopped fifty yards past the store and listened. He had left the road which turned south to run out over the sagebrush hills, and stood in the soft earth of a foot trail at the edge of the tules. He thought he had heard movement between him and the lake, but he wasn't sure. Now that he had stopped, he could hear nothing but his own breathing and the rustle of the night wind in the tules. As Dusty stood there he saw the fire in the lake just as Sally had described it, a flame that came streaking up from the lake and throwing an eerie, smoky light upon the wind-moved water.

"Another night of this," Dusty said aloud, "and Charlie will be clear out of his head."

Dusty stood motionless, listening as he watched the fire, and suddenly became aware that he made a clear target for anyone hiding in the tules or hunkering down in the sagebrush along the foot of the hill. He dropped to his stomach, and wormed his way forward, stopping now and then to listen, and again going on.

A complete and total darkness was upon the earth now. In the lake the strange column of fire had dropped until it was a faint glow. Behind Dusty were the lights in the hotel windows. Over him the sky was a depthless black with the stars mere pinpoints of distant light. He was still following a footpath that ran around the shore of the lake. He realized the uselessness of trying to find anyone here. The chances were good that he'd stumble into a bushwhack trap. He rose, and keeping his tall body in a half-bend, he ran back toward the hotel. He was nearly in front of the hotel when his foot struck something soft and yielding. He tripped, tried to regain his balance, and

failing, sprawled full length in the grass.

Dusty knew, even before he got to his hands and knees and felt of the object that had tripped him, that it was a man's body. He picked up a wrist, felt for the pulse, and found none. He drew a match from his pocket, and carefully cupping the flame with his hands, had a quick look at the dead man's face. He blew out the match, and for a time sat motionless, utterly astounded by what he had seen. The dead man was Bill Tulk.

Dusty had expected to see the face of Charlie Reed or perhaps Pete Yager. It wouldn't have surprised him if it had been the stableman or the little clerk. But Bill Tulk! He tried to bring the threads of the crazy pattern together, and could not. It made absolutely no sense. If the big sheepman was in this thing, he'd have to be on the other side. He certainly wouldn't be on Charlie Reed's side.

Then another thought came to Dusty. The killing might have been a mistake. Possibly the murderer had thought Tulk was Pete Yager or Charlie Reed. Maybe Dusty himself. He thought about it for a time, and gave the idea up. There was not the least resemblance between Tulk's burly figure and Yager's or Charlie's or his own. Besides, anybody shrewd enough to plan a devil's brew like this wouldn't make the mistake of killing one of his confederates. Tulk's death was no accident, but why? For that question Dusty had no answer.

DUSTY lifted the body and carried it to the hotel. Charlie Reed was sitting before the cold stove as if seeking its warmth, a shriveled old man waiting for a death he believed he could not escape. Dusty, not wanting Charlie to see the body, carried it around the hotel to the back porch. He went into the kitchen, lighted a lamp, and brought Tulk inside. A quick examination showed that his skull had been crushed in exactly the same manner as had Howdy Gale's. The only other marks on the sheepman were the three little holes on top of his head.

Tulk's gun was in his holster. More than one hundred dollars in gold was in one pocket. In another was a silver watch. Then, when Dusty looked inside Tulk's hat, he found a folded piece of brown wrapping paper. In the same scrawled hand that he had seen on the other papers were the words. "The Phantom Claw has struck. Only when Charlie Reed dies or leaves the lakes will the Claw's work be done."

Dusty closed the back door and went through the dining room into the lobby. Charlie seemed to know who it was without looking up. He said, "The moaning and the fire again, Dusty. Did you hear and see?"

"Yes," Dusty said, and pulling up a chair, sat down.

"Then you know this Phantom Claw is real, and that the fate it has decreed for me will not be long in coming?"

"I don't know anything of the kind," Dusty said testily. He remembered the shades, got up and pulled them, and sat down again. "Charlie, you must have had a good education before you came here?"

The old man looked up, quick interest breaking across his pale face. He asked, "I did. Why?"

"You talk like you did," Dusty answered.

"If I hadn't joined up in sixty-one," Charlie said, "I might have been a lawyer in Ohio now instead of being what I am out here. After four years of fighting I couldn't stay in an office, so I drifted out to Montana. I made a stake in the gold mines, hooked up with Howdy Gale and Pete Yager in Nevada, and landed up right here. I've been here ever since."

"You settled down," Dusty said

sharply, "and got married. There were two things that came out in you and you let them grow until they festered your soul. You got married, and from what I hear your wife died from overwork in the kitchen of the hotel. You've mighty near made a slave out of Sally. Two things, Charlie; your love of money and your superstitions. It doesn't make sense that a man as smart as you are and with your education would go out of his head like you have over a lot of crazy junk."

Charlie reared up, quick anger bringing color into his ashen cheeks. He snapped, "Dusty, you're a loud-talking pup who's got the same manners a skunk has. I'm sitting here ready to die . . ."

"That's right," Dusty snapped. "Ready to die. You know what Bill Tulk said tonight when Sally made him pay ten cents a head for his sheep when he brought 'em through the gate? He said it would be a great day for folks around here when somebody else was running this place. He said nobody else would charge the kind of rates you do. How does that sound to a man who's ready to die?"

Charlie sank back in his chair, eyes on Dusty as if a new thought had come to him. He wiped a hand over his face, and slowly shook his head. He said, "Money. I've got lots of it. I—I guess I don't need any more."

"Then why don't you sell and move out?" Dusty demanded. "I love Sally. I know she loves me, but she won't marry me because she thinks she owes something to you. Why, I don't know, but that's the kind of a girl she is."

"You want my money," Charlie said accusingly.

Dusty raised a clenched fist as if to strike the old man, and slowly lowered it. "Look, Charlie," he said, "all I want is Sally and for her to know that she's free to do what she wants. If you sold out, got yourself a little place in town and hired somebody to take care of you, she'd know she wouldn't have to give up her own life that she has a right to."

"Sell out." Charlie said it as if he'd never really thought about it before. "Howdy's dead. Sam Ramson's dead. Pete?" Sudden fear broke across his face. "Somebody died tonight. Was it Pete?"

DUSTY shook his head. "It was Bill Tulk."

"Tulk? Why should the Phantom Claw kill him? Pete's the only one I've got left. I'll give him enough so he won't have to work. I'll do it, Dusty. I'll sell."

"This man Silvers will buy," Dusty said, and rose. "I'll go get him."

"Silvers." Suddenly it came back to Charlie; the fear, the superstitions, the terrors of these last hours. "The Phantom Claw. I won't live long enough to do anything I've wanted to do. I'll die and I'll go to hell and I'll suffer . . ."

"Sit there. I'll go get Silvers."

Dusty paused at the desk, and compared Thane Silvers' signature with the writing on the letter the California syndicate had sent Charlie. As he went up the stairs to Silvers' room Dusty wondered if he was making the right move. If Thane Silvers was behind all this Phantom Claw scheme. Dusty had a feeling he could flush the man into the open. If Silvers made Charlie a fair offer, he was on the level. If not, if he was trying to scare Charlie into taking half a price or if it was a scheme to frighten Charlie's buckaroos off the ranch to set up an easy cattle steal, then he'd show his hand and Dusty would know what to do.

"Come in," Silvers called in answer to Dusty's knock.

Dusty shoved the door open, and stayed in the hall, his gun palmed.

Silvers was sitting beside a small table that held a lamp, a book in his hand. A slow smile came to his lips when he saw who it was, and when he closed his book and laid it on the table, Dusty saw the gun in his hand.

"Come in and shut the door," Silvers said, still holding the gun, and when Dusty had obeyed, Silvers slipped his gun back into his shoulder holster. "I may be wrong, Miles, but I'm thinking you're the only one around here who isn't into murder up to his neck. Put your gun up."

Dusty came on to the table, dropping his Colt into leather. He took from his pocket the letter Charlie had given him. He asked, "Did you send this?"

Silvers glanced at the letter, and looked up at Dusty, an amused smile on his thin lips. "Why do you ask?"

"Because I'm not sure," Dusty said bluntly, "whether you're into murder up to your neck or not."

For a long moment Silvers' eyes were locked with Dusty's. He seemed to be probing Dusty's mind, and having difficulty in reaching a decision in his own. Finally he asked, "So you think I'm the brain behind the Phantom Claw masquerade?"

"I'm not thinking," Dusty answered, "that far yet. While ago at the bridge you said you wanted to buy Charlie out. Now I want it straight."

"You want what straight?"

"You gave me a lot of round-about talk while ago. I don't believe you're here for your health unless you're afraid of lead poisoning somewhere and you're hiding out. On the other hand, if you're here to look the property over, and you're on the square about trying to buy it, I think I've got Charlie talked into listening to any fair offer."

"So." Silvers looked at the letter Charlie had given. He got up and pulled a shade down. As he came back to his chair he said apologetically, "One of these times our Phantom friend may get boogery enough to start opening up with a six-gun on anything he sees behind a lighted window. One murder always leads to another one, and I don't care to be the second."

"You'd be the third," Dusty said, watching Silvers' face closely. "I found Bill Tulk while ago not far from the hotel. He had his skull caved in just like Howdy Gale did."

Silvers had started to read the letter again, but now his head snapped up, his eyes on Dusty again. "Bill Tulk? Why . . . I don't remember hearing about a man named Bill Tulk. Who is he?"

"A sheepman who took his band through the gate this evening. I reckon he was camped a little ways south of here, but I don't have any idea why he was hanging around here or why he got beefed."

Silvers shrugged. "Like I said, one murder begets another." He started to read again, and it seemed to Dusty he took a long time. Finally he laid the paper down. "I don't know yet what you want straight, Miles. I want to buy Charlie out, but that doesn't mean I've got anything to do with the Phantom Claw."

"Did you write that letter?" Dusty demanded.

"No," Silvers snapped. "I never saw it before."

DUSTY crouched, right hand splayed over gun butt. "You're a liar, Silvers. I've had a feeling all the time we were going to wind up looking at each other through gunsmoke. I guess this is as good a time as any."

The amused smile came again to Thane Silvers' thin lips. "I don't see that we need have any trouble, Miles. After all, swapping lead with me won't make you any more drummer business. Why do you call me a liar?"

"That letter is written entirely by hand," Dusty said quickly, "and it isn't signed by any man's name. It says California Cattle Syndicate, and gives a box number to write to. It looked like a fake all the time. Before I came upstairs I had a look at your signature on the hotel register, and the writing sure looks the same to me."

Silvers got up, and paced the length of the floor. He kept his hand away from his gun, and Dusty saw that the man had no intention of letting it come to gun play yet.

Suddenly Silvers stopped pacing, and wheeled to face Dusty. "All right, Miles," he said grimly. "I haven't been able to make up my mind about you. You just happen to be here same as Windy Brown, and I can't see why in hell you're so bent on keeping your nose into business that isn't yours. Why can't you sell what Charlie will buy, and go on? Instead of that you keep trying to prod me into trouble."

"I've told you I'm not going until this business is squared up. If you're not into this, then I'm not trying to prod you into trouble."

"All right, all right." Silvers made a gesture as if to dismiss the whole subject. "I'm another fellow who just happened to be here when this thing broke, and I've been afraid I was going to be dragged into it. Now I'll give it to you straight. I wrote that letter. It wasn't a fake. I'm the California Cattle Syndicate, and I own several spreads in California. However, I'm not a cattleman. I'm a speculator. I buy to sell. I'd heard about this layout, and when I got a man on the string who wanted something like this, I wrote to Charlie. When he didn't answer, I came up here to look it over. I knew if I told them why I was really here, they'd be putting their best foot forward. I didn't want that. I wanted a chance to see how things really were, so I said I was here for my health. Now are you satisfied?"

Dusty wasn't, but he couldn't put his finger on anything that was wrong. Silvers' story sounded plausible. It was possible that he had stumbled into this situation the same as Dusty had. There was no point in pressing Silvers. The only thing yet to do was to see what sort of an offer Silvers made.

"It's not whether I'm satisfied or not, Silvers," Dusty said grimly. "It's going to be up to Charlie."

Dusty reached behind him, and opened the door. He trusted Thane Silvers no more than he did any wild thing which had been pressed into a corner. He backed through the doorway, watching every move Silvers made. Silvers followed Dusty out of the room, closed the door, and they went down the stairs together.

CHAPTER V

Claws of the Phantom

PETE YAGER and the little hotel clerk were with Charlie when Dusty and Silvers came down. Yager was slouched down in a chair, his sour face showing the evil mood which was upon him. The clerk was pulling fiercely on a huge cigar. He kept looking behind him, jumping at the least unusual sound. He was, Dusty saw, as jittery as he had been at the table.

It was Charlie Reed who astonished Dusty. The fear of the supernatural which had paralyzed the old man for more than twenty-four hours seemed to have gone from him. As Dusty and Silvers came into the room, Charlie was saying, "I've been crazy as a loon, Pete, just like Dusty said. This Phantom Claw isn't anything more than a masquerade that some scoundrel is putting on. I'm not just sure why, but

one thing I am sure of. When I heard that Bill Tulk was killed, I knew it wasn't any spirit."

Charlie saw Silvers then, and poked a bony finger at him, suspicion in his sly eyes. "Dusty says you're wanting to buy me out. I ain't selling, not for any amount of money."

Silvers' eyes swung to Yager, then to the little clerk who suddenly grabbed his cigar out of his mouth, and burst into a long groan. "The Phantom Claw," he shrieked. "Two men's been killed by it. I can feel it, right here in this room with us."

Charlie began to tremble, his newfound courage seeping out of him. He rose, and gripped the back of his chair. "Murder. The Phantom Claw. That moaning sound. Fire on the lake." He looked imploringly at Dusty. "If I sold and went away, son, do you think this thing would let me alone?"

"I thought you'd finally come to your senses," Dusty said in disgust. "When I came downstairs you were telling Yager that you knew it was some scoundrel masquerading as the Phantom Claw. Now you're as boogery as ever."

Charlie ran a hand over his lined face, and shook his head in bewilderment. "Did I say that, son? I can't seem to remember. I can't think very clearly. You—you reckon I ought to sell?"

"I think you'd better give Silvers a chance to make an offer."

Charlie picked up his chair, and hit the floor with it, the legs cracking sharply against the boards. "All right, Silvers. What's your offer?"

"One hundred thousand dollars," Silvers said quickly, "and you move out tonight. You leave everything exactly as it is. Take your clothes and leave. There's just one thing. Your girl's staying here so you won't go back on your deal."

"Sold," Charlie said jubilantly. He straightened up, and grinned at Yager. "Pete, what do you think of that? One hundred thousand dollars! We'll just harness up the hack, throw in a suitcase of clothes, and be on our way."

Yager grunted, "I reckon that don't include me, Charlie. I'll stay and work for the new boss. That's what I've been doing for you all my life, eating beans and sitting in a saddle sixteen hours a day or more for thirty a month. I might just as well keep on till I die in my tracks."

Charlie looked hurt. "Why, Pete, you know I always aimed to share everything I have with you. You and Howdy Gale and Sam Ramson and the rest of the boys helped me make everything I've got. I wouldn't leave you out."

"Like hell you wouldn't," Yager snarled. "Go on, Charlie. Take your money and vamoose. Sit there in Smoky Butte and play with your gold until somebody plugs you in the back for it. You won't take it with you where you're going."

Charlie threw out his hands in a gesture of futility. "All right, Pete, if that's the way you want it." He swung back to Silvers. "Let's wind this thing up, mister. Where's your hundred thousand dollars?"

"Of course I don't carry that much gold with me," Silvers said smoothly, "but I can write you a check on my account in a San Francisco bank. Tomorrow I'll come into Smoky Butte and we'll have the papers fixed up and signed."

"Fair enough," Charlie agreed. He stretched, and yawned lustily. "Silvers, I don't see any reason why I can't sleep here tonight. It's a long drive into Smoky Butte."

"I said you're leaving pronto," Silvers said sharply. "You, too." He nodded at Dusty, a sudden and venomous hatred washing across his lean, dark

face. "You've been pushing me around, and I'm done taking it. While I'm owning this place, you're hanging out somewhere else."

IT WASN'T right, Dusty was thinking. It wasn't right at all. He'd expected things to break, but not like this. Old Charlie was even crazier than Dusty had thought. He'd swung from one thing to another with little or no reason. Pete Yager had shown a sudden vicious bitterness that seemingly had no logic behind it. The little cigar-smoking clerk had broken out into a sudden and uncalled for shriek about the Phantom Claw. Now Thane Silvers, with a little reason, was saying flatly that as long as he owned the hotel, Dusty Miles wouldn't stay there.

"Why now, Silvers," Dusty said softly, "there's no reason for you to take on like that. It's a long ways to Smoky Butte."

The dark, satanic expression of wickedness seemed to deepen on Thane Silvers' face. It was as if he had finally reached the goal he had set for himself, and having reached it, the urge in him was too great to wait a few more minutes.

"You're pulling out, Miles," Silvers grated, "and you're pulling fast. I had to treat you like I had kid gloves on, and that isn't my way. Now git."

"Take it easy, Thane," the little clerk said.

There was tension here in the hotel lobby, the kind of tension that comes when men's nerves have been pulled taut, and then something happens that pulls them tighter. No, Dusty told himself in that strange moment which seemed to ribbon out endlessly, something was wrong. Then with unexpected swiftness everything fell into place. Pete Yager's bitterness, the long hours in the saddle for thirty a month. The gold that folks said Charlie Reed had buried. Yager would know about that. Pete Yager had found the bodies of both Sam Ramson and Howdy Gale. Yager had brought the little clerk from Smoky Butte when Sam Ramson had been killed. Thane Silvers had come shortly after Ramson's death. Yager's uncalled-for anger in the store that evening because Dusty was taking chips in the game. Now Silvers' insistence that Charlie pull out at once.

Slowly Dusty took a step back so that he could see all three of them: Silvers, Yager, and the little clerk. This was the payoff. There were still some things he couldn't understand, but he had the main parts of the puzzle exactly placed in a tight and vicious pattern. Long odds, but he had no choice. Sally was somewhere around. If he failed . . . ! He gave no thought to that. He couldn't fail.

"Well," Silvers snarled. "You're standing there like you were paralyzed, Miles. You heard what I said."

"No use hurrying him, Thane," the little clerk said. He took a fresh grip on his cigar, and shot a quick look at Yager. "No hurry, Thane." He sounded as if he were pleading with a stubborn-minded child.

Yager had sensed what was coming. He was crouching, right hand close to gun, eyes on Dusty. He said, "Drummer, you've been making trouble ever since you got here. Now if you're smart, you'll move out and move fast."

They had what they wanted, but they were pressing him. If he went first for his gun, and they downed him, well, crazy old Charlie would be left alone with them. Probably they'd let him go, and they might let him take Sally. But Silvers had said Sally stayed, and Dusty was remembering what Silvers had said about Sally when earlier that evening they had been talking at the bridge. So Dusty couldn't get out, and let events take their own course. He had

one choice. He said coldly, "Charlie, I've been thinking about this business you've just transacted with Silvers. It's got a smell that plain stinks. Let's think it over till morning."

"Stay out of it," the little clerk cried. "You're asking for hot lead. If you keep it up, you'll get it."

They were afraid of him. Dusty saw that. It had been his dogged questioning, his stubborn refusal to be sidetracked that had ruined their scheme to slowly break Charlie and drive him into insanity or scare him into a cheap sale. Now that Silvers was going through with this farce of pretending to buy Charlie out, Dusty was still dangerous to him. They knew that as long as he was around he'd be watching their movements, and they wanted none of that. The cook wouldn't bother them, nor the stableman. Windy Brown was probably in his room asleep. Sally? There was no predicting what they'd do with her, but the thought drove him back another step, eyes shifting from one to the other as he watched for the first gunward move.

"What's that?" Charlie was demanding. "Who's asking for hot lead? Why, we ain't having no trouble. Come on, Dusty. Let's you and me go harness our outfits up, and hit the dirt."

"I like my room, Charlie," Dusty said. "I'm staying. You go ahead."

CHARLIE picked up his chair, and his shouted words were were a battle cry that broke it open. "These coyotes have been working up to this for more'n a week, son. It's time they got it. Let her rip." He swung his chair over his head, let it go straight at Pete Yager, and wheeled toward the shotgun on the wall behind him.

Thane Silvers whipped a short-barreled gun from his shoulder holster, and drove a bullet at Dusty. His was the first move, but that advantage was not enough, for Dusty's shot laced a piece of lead into his heart. He went forward on his face in a loose, curling drop, life gone from him before he hit the floor.

There was powdersmoke drifting ceilingward, the bite of it in Dusty's nostrils, the flame ribbons from Colt muzzles lashing their brightness into the yellow lamplight, the hideous scream of lead as lives were taken and power blasted from the Phantom claw. The little clerk teetered back on his heels, splintering the floor with his slugs as bullets from Dusty's Colt brought death to him. He was against the wall, trying with the last feral spark of life in him to bring his gun up once more, and failing, fell in an inert heap.

Dusty swung his gun toward Pete Yager. He hadn't taken time to look at the buckaroo since Charlie had thrown his chair, but he knew Yager's gun was working. Dusty had felt no bullet from the man, and in that split second he wondered why. Then he knew. Beneath all of this trouble was a deep and bitter hatred that had gone back through the years, hatred in Pete Yager's heart for Charlie Reed, a hatred that Dusty had felt and not understood. Yager had been watching Dusty, not Charlie because he had not feared the old man, and Charlie's chair had smashed him against the wall. There had been time for Charlie to grab the shotgun and bring it to his shoulder just as Yager squeezed trigger. Charlie lurched with the impact of Yager's bullet, but he kept his grip on the shotgun. Before Yager could fire again, Charlie's blast of buckshot tore off the top of his head.

Charlie grabbed the stove, held himself a minute while he grinned at Dusty. He croaked, "That busted the Phantom Claw, son, busted it plumb to hell." Then he pitched full length on his face.

Windy Brown was in the doorway, a naked Colt in his hand. When Dusty

saw him he brought his gun up, not knowing where the freighter fitted into this grim murder game, but he didn't press trigger, for Brown yelled, "Hold it, Dusty. I'm on your side even if I am too damned slow getting here." He came on across the room to where Charlie lay, and had a look at the old man's wound. "In the shoulder, son. He ain't hurt bad. Help me get him upstairs, and I'll patch it up. I ain't no medico, but I'm about as good as the doc they've got in Smoky Butte. And say, I've got to let Sally out of her room. I locked her in there, and she's about ready to kill me."

Later, when Charlie's wound had been dressed, and the dead men moved from the hotel lobby, Dusty sat down with Windy Brown and listened.

"I've done my share of kicking about Charlie's money-grabbing, but I kind o' like the old boy. Somebody else might have been a heap worse, and that bridge he's put in has sure saved me a lot of miles. I got wind of this scheme about the time Sam Ramson was killed. Yager did that. Shoved Sam off the Rimrock, I guess. It was Bill Tulk that first said something about it, but he didn't tell me much. Said he was supposed to take his sheep through and make a big fuss. It was just part of the game to worry Charlie."

"But this Silvers . . ." Dusty began.

"Now hold on, drummer boy. I'm guessing, and there's a lot we'll never know. One thing I do know, though, was that Pete Yager has hated Charlie for years. There was the four of 'em that had been together a long time: Sam Ramson, Howdy Gale, Pete, and Charlie. Charlie had Howdy keeping the toll gate and Sam running the hotel. He was paying both of 'em good money. Folks cuss Charlie a lot for being tight, but on things that count he's plumb generous. Anyhow, Pete was jealous. He just wasn't worth a damn, and the thirty he got a month was kind of a pension. Charlie just kept him on because he'd come up the trail in the old days and he's kind o' sentimental about those things. Pete was always wanting to ramroad the ranch, and I've heard him get drunk in Smoky Butte and say things about Charlie that was purty tough to listen to."

"How do you reckon Tulk got killed?" Dusty asked.

"I'm guessing again," Brown answered, "but he told me he was supposed to get a hundred dollars to make a row at the gate. Now mebbe he came back after his money, and jumped Yager. Yager didn't have no money, and mebbe he'd made that deal without Silvers knowing anything about it. Mebbe he was afraid to ask Silvers, and Tulk got mad. Then Yager let him have it."

"Funny about Charlie," Dusty mused. "He sure wasn't crazy the way he heaved that chair at Yager and yelled to let her rip."

BROWN chuckled. "Old Charlie is an actor, that's all, and a damned good one. All these superstitions that he makes so much of he don't believe in at all. I've been freighting through here for twenty years, and I know Charlie mighty well. That's just his way of having fun. Yager thought it was the real McCoy, and him and Silvers worked all this stuff out. I don't know just what they did. Mebbe Yager went around to the other side of the lake and lit a pot of oil and shoved it on a raft out into the water. Maybe he even got in a boat and rowed it out a piece. That moaning might have been made by tooting in a cow horn. I've heard rackets about like that, but you put it in with the fire and a couple of murders, and it was enough to make any man boogery."

"A good bunch, those three," Dusty

said bitterly.

"They was for a fact. I dunno how they got together. Mebbe Yager got drunk and talked in town some night, and Silvers picked him up, seeing a good thing. I know Silvers done some gambling in Smoky Butte a couple of months ago. That little clerk Yager brought in was likely Silvers' man. Silvers mailed that letter from San Francisco, so he must have gone back there. I reckon he did that so he'd get Charlie to thinking about selling. Likewise it gave him a good reason for being here besides his health which any fool could see was all right. Schemers all right, them three, and they had something to scheme for. Charlie's got fifty thousand in gold hid around here, and mebbe Yager had spied around until he knowed where it was. Reckon the whole game was to scare Charlie off so he'd sell and they could look for the gold, or else to drive him crazy so Sally would have to take him away. But what in hell was the thing they used to kill Howdy and Tulk with?"

Dusty went behind the desk and came back with a short-handled hammer. The back of it had three sharp points set in the pattern of an iscosceles triangle. "Yager had that inside his coat. I reckon he'd have used it on me or you if he'd had a chance."

Brown swore. "He would do that. The dirty, damned killer." He rose. "Well, son, you done a good job. None of us knowed what the play was gonna be, or we could have nipped it a heap sooner. I figgered I'd hang around and give Charlie a hand when it broke, but you beat me to it."

"Funny they just didn't murder everybody and be done with it," Dusty said.

"Yager was never a man to do anything the easy way. Besides, the buckaroos over at the ranch would have got onto it, and mebbe taken a hand. It would have been a mite risky to have done a general job of massacreeing. This way they figgered they'd get to the same place and do it gradual. Everybody knew about Charlie and his superstitions. Well, guess I'll go up to Charlie's room and sit a spell. Sally might want to get out for some air." He chuckled. "Charlie and me figgered it was better to keep her out of things by locking her up. She was sure mad."

Sally came down a moment later. She put her hand through Dusty's arm, and they walked along the road to the bridge. The first dawn light was in the sky when Sally said, "Dad says you talked pretty straight to him about me. He says he hadn't thought about it just that way before. Now he's going to sell out, and put his money in a bank. He'll live in town, and our cook will take care of him."

Dusty tried to think of the pretty words he'd thought up to ask Sally to marry him, but at the moment he couldn't think of any of them. He blurted, "A drummer's wagon is a terrible thing to live in. In the summer you get all the dust and the heat and the wind. In the winter time you freeze and you get snow in your face."

"But it's so interesting," Sally murmured. "You see so many kinds of people, and you're traveling all the time."

"I've got a feeling," Dusty said sadly as he took Sally into his arms, "that before long we'll be settled down in some town with me running a store, and we'll be living in a house with green shutters and a picket fence and locust trees in front. That right?"

Sally made no answer. Dusty had tilted her face up to his, and Sally's lips were very busy.

DIM-TRAIL DESTINY

By LEE MONROE

Great novelet of a battle-cub who chose to stand and fight—against every gunman north of the brimstone!

THE KID grinned and said: "I've killed men with those guns. Five of 'em, in fact."

Marjorie had talked to many of the men who'd ridden for her father, and she had found some unusual ones among them, but this new kid really puzzled her.

She wrinkled up her eyes a little and tried to fathom the kid.

He said: "See that pebble lying down there by the gate post? Watch it."

The kid's righthand gun was in his hand as though by magic then, and it hammered once, and the pebble was gone. There was a neat little furrow and a hole in the ground where the pebble had been, but the pebble was definitely gone; it hadn't simply been dumped or kicked to one side in a spurt of dirt, it was very neatly gone. The gate post must have been a full hundred feet from where they were standing.

The kid grinned at Marjorie putting the gun back in its holster.

"How do you like that?" he asked.

"But you must not be even twenty yet," Marjorie said aloud but as if she were talking to herself.

"I'm nineteen," the kid supplied.

Marjorie knew that her father had hired-on the kid about a week ago, as a general hand ostensibly but for the guns actually. As a cowpuncher as long as that was all that needed to be done around the place, but as a gunman when a gunman was needed. But what she was remembering now was the sort of awe in which the other men held this youngster . . .

"But how—how could you have killed five men—and not be in jail, or—"

"Or in a hangnoose? They started it. I had to fix them or they would have fixed me," the kid supplied.

Marjorie frowned. Her blue eyes became darker, and the frown did not make her less pretty. Marjorie Becker was, in fact, a very pretty girl. There were several sons of several wealthy cattlemen on nearby ranges who were quite active in the field of corraling Marjorie Becker for matrimonial purposes.

"But how," Marjorie persisted, "would five occasions have come up, at your age, I mean in the few years

you've been able to carry guns, when men would have wanted to kill you—"

The kid's grin broadened.

"Men don't like me," the kid explained simply. "I say whatever I feel like, and men don't like you sometimes when you say what you feel like."

Marjorie's deep blue eyes clouded. *Yes,* she thought, *it was for his guns that this youngster had been hired. Her father would undoubtedly find this youngster very useful . . .*

"Oh," she murmured. "That's how it is," she added after a moment.

"U'm," the kid grinned. He had his eye on another pebble that was well inside the corral, that he could see through the slats of the corral. "See that pebble in the corral there? Come over here a little, you probably can't see it through the slats from where you're standing . . ."

THE room was thickly smoke-filled. There was a lamp on the table, and as the layers of smoke moved about, the faces around the table would seem to come and go in the eerie light.

"They call him *what?"* Ed Carrington asked irritably.

"The Sunset Kid," one of Ed's crew said softly. "Nobody seems to know much else about him. Just this brand he goes by, and how he handles guns."

"The Sunset Kid," Ed repeated sarcastically.

Another of the four henchmen spoke. He cleared his throat and explained wearily: "The story has it there's never a sunset but the Kid is meeting somebody in the dust. That's where he's supposed to've got the brand."

"Nobody knows where he came from," another one said, "and nobody—"

Ed Carrington didn't look like the usual trail town gun-boss. He was short, and he had a fat round face, and soft lips that writhed around the cigar that was eternally in his mouth unlit. He interrupted:

"What is he, just lucky? Or is the whole thing a loco legend that a lot of you fools have built into something that everybody believes now—"

"That's what he is, a legend," the first henchman said.

"Oh no he ain't just lucky," the second henchman said softly. He put a quirley he'd just rolled with one hand between his thin lips, and rested his gaze calmly on Carrington. "I happen to have known personally two of the gents he gunned down. Wouldn't neither of them been gunned down by a button who was just lucky."

The third henchman grunted in a half chuckle. A quirley was tacked to his lips, and his eyes were squinted against the smoke trailing up his face.

"Lucky," he grunted with the chuckle. "That's good."

Carrington swung on this one.

"All right, then he's a gun-master, a Colt-king, the fastest man with guns in Oklahoma and points west!" Carrington stopped abruptly and squirmed in his chair and looked sharply around at the eyes of the others.

"I don't suppose one of you gentlemen could stand up to him by any chance," he said abruptly, keeping the sarcasm thick in his voice. "I suppose he'd be too—"

"Not me," the soft-voiced henchman said. "You wouldn't get me to face up to him."

The other three started laughing.

"You hired us on as jest plain, ordinary *gunmen,"* the other one who had spoken said wearily, "an' that's the kind of wages you pay us. You can't get a *gun-king* fer the kind of wages you pay us, Carrington!"

Carrington exploded out of his seat.

"All right, then, I'll hire-on a gun-king! I'll import a Colt-handler from —from *Texas!* I'll bring in the fastest

gun in Texas—and then we'll see how damned trigger-easy this *Sunset Kid* is!"

He flung his arms out and kicked his chair out of his way turning from the table.

"All right, outside! All of yuh! Out!"

A couple of the henchmen chuckled as they filed out into the main room of the saloon.

Closing the door of the office behind him, the soft-voiced one said to the others:

"He must want that Barrett place bad!"

"An' how!" one of the others rejoined.

MARJORIE BECKER was equally at home in jeans and saddle or in the large main room of her father's sprawling ranchhouse being hostess at the big social affairs the cattleman was famous for. Jay Becker had brought this refinement out of the East with him; it was an incongruous detail in the otherwise wholly frontier-West picture of the man. He had smashed his way to the forefront of the new-West cattlemen and he was still growing, but the big dances still occurred regularly every month at his pretentious homestead. Of course, they were not entirely incongruous, rival cattlemen argued; the Governor was among the guests on two occasions, soon after both of which the Becker holdings were known to grow by leaps and bounds. And Becker was amply satisfied with the way Marjorie, in the absence of his wife who had died on his original trip West, presided over the affairs. . . .

But the saddle was Marjorie's preference, and thrusting down the south trail now on her sleek pinto, she felt happiness and freedom that she did not know in her father's home.

She was smiling when she stepped down at the little ranchhouse at the first fork in the trail. She was smiling when she put her hand into the big hand of the young man who rose from inspecting the injured foot of one of his mavericks, when she looked up into his steady brown eyes and saw that he was smiling too.

He said: "Hello, Marjorie."

And she said: "Hello, Jim."

But it was all in the eyes and not in the words.

Jim Barrett took off his stetson with his left hand. Marjorie Becker squeezed his right hand firmly with her left hand. And they stood there in the yard of his little place and they smiled at each other.

The truth of the thing was not in the words or in the smiles though, but in what was behind the eyes.

The sadness, the bitterness inevitably grew behind the eyes. The truth grew there, and finally it was all that was there.

"I just had a call from another member of your family," Jim said. He said it as casually as ordinarily such a remark would have been said.

Marjorie's hand tightened on his hand then until the tanned knuckles of her small fist shone white.

"Dad—Dad, you mean?"

"Dad," Jim said.

"Oh," Marjorie said very softly.

"And he was very convincing."

"Oh."

Jim sucked in a tight breath, and his words came on the out-breath.

"In fact, Dad put his cards very plainly on the table. Very plainly.

"In fact," Jim went on tightly after a moment, "Dad said that this was his last offer, either I took it—or else."

"Oh Jim," Marjorie whispered almost before he'd finished talking. She searched his eyes with hers, hard. "You must accept it, then, Jim," she husked. "You must accept it and we'll go away

and we'll start up somewhere else—"

Jim was shaking his head slowly.

He said: "I'm afraid not."

"Jim, you must! It's the only way—!"

"It's no way at all, Marjorie. We couldn't start up even a two-bit spread on what he offered, the money would all be gone even before we could get set up anywhere else, much less start up a new place.

"And I don't need to tell you," he went on in very soft, very measured tones, "that he'd bring you back if it was the last thing he ever did.

"He wants you here, you know that. You are part of his over-all plan, part of his empire. He wants you to marry the son of another wealthy cattleman, and so combine two big cattle empires, and so build his empire into the biggest in the West."

It was a lengthy speech, it was the whole story finally out in the open, but they both knew it was long overdue. They had been making believe until now, they had known how it must be finally and inevitably, but they had been pretending that somehow it must work out because they wanted it to so very much.

"But—but regardless of—of us," Marjorie said suddenly, "regardless of us, Jim, you can't stay—you can't stop Dad now—he's already started to hire-on gunmen for the showdown, I was talking to one of them this morning—"

"Oh but I can stay," Jim said. He tightened his lips in and continued: "My grandfather staked out this spread, Marjorie, and my father built it up to what it is today. When my father died, he saw what was coming and he said: 'Becker is going to want this place, Jim, and so is Carrington. It's got the best waterhole in the whole State, and Becker and Carrington are both going to want that waterhole. Don't let them take it, Jim.' And mebbeso I'm loco, but to me that was a sort of last will and testament." Jim narrowed his eyes a little. "My grandfather wouldn't have run. My father wouldn't have run. I guess I can't run either."

BEWILDERMENT took hold of Marjorie then, panic almost. *She is the rich man's daughter now, she is not the girl I love,* a voice said in the back of Jim's brain, and he thrust consideration of it aside and lowered his eyes from Marjorie's so he would not see this.

"I talked to Dad about it," Marjorie began frantically, "you know I talked to him about it, but always he said the same thing, there was nothing he could do about it, if he didn't take your place, Carrington would—"

"Sure, sure," Jim said softly. "I know how it is."

That was when the tears came to Marjorie's eyes, and her lower lip trembled, and the voice in the back of Jim Barrett's mind persisted: *She is the rich man's daughter now, she is not the girl I love. . . .*

But after she had whirled and climbed into the saddle and ridden away without another word and without his trying to stop her, Jim Barrett flayed himself bitterly.

What the hell else did he expect her to do, how the hell else did he expect her to act? What was a girl supposed to do for love—give up everything, break with her kin, give up her very life, take her place beside the man she loved and die beside him when he fought an insane single-handed fight against two powerful range-barons? . . .

Carrington's messenger caught up with Bill Russell after three days' hard riding and another day of prodding around in one Texas town after another

making inquiries.

Bill Russell was a tall, very thin, man of about thirty-five and his steel-grey eyes were slits and his wide flat lips were hitched up in one corner in a sort of permanent half-sneer. Bill Russell had the reputation of being the fastest gunman in Texas; to have reached the age of thirty-five in his business was the best proof of his prowess.

He was to be had for a price, but the price was very high. The messenger sped back to Water range apprehensively, for he had settled for almost twice the figure Carrington had allowed.

Carrington chewed the eternal cigar feverishly. He eyed the messenger fiercely.

"Okay," he finally snarled. "I'll take half the difference out of the fee I guaranteed you."

"Why, you—!" the messenger began in a rage.

"Go on," Carrington said.

Carrington turned to his rolltop desk and did some figuring. The messenger stood there running his hand back through his unruly mop of hair, raging inside.

The messenger blurted: "I'll get even with you for this, Carrington!"

Carrington's round face was almost pleasant. He tossed a small roll of bills on the table in the center of the office.

Carrington said softly past the cigar: "You don't want to go around talking that way, son."

Bill Russell rode a beautiful palomino, a sleek, alert, shiny-black animal. He brought it to the rise above Water range on the south the morning of the third day after the messenger's visit. This was pretty exactly on schedule; Russell had agreed to arrive by noon of this day.

He half turned the palomino as he drew up atop the rise. He surveyed the country for a moment, without expression, and then moved on down the trail at an easy jog.

At the fork in the trail he saw a small ranchhouse. He would not have given it a second glance if he had not seen the four riders swirling up in front of it; their dust was dissipating back along the trail that led toward Watertown.

Bill Russell had seen too many of this breed in his day not to be able to identify these four riders at first look. He instinctively slowed the palomino's gait.

THE four riders were stepping down warily. A signal obviously passed between them and they started spreading out around the house as a stream will split where it hits a boulder.

Bill Russell brought his animal to a halt. He was still back far enough along the trail not to have caught the ears or eyes of the four gunmen.

Bill Russell saw the lanky young man appear on the veranda then, and the four gunmen come to a stop in their tracks. It was plainly a showdown set-up, this was plain in the tense carriage of the lanky fellow, and in the way the gunmen got very quiet where they stood.

One of the gunmen looked as if he were saying something. And the lanky young man didn't look as if he were replying.

The lanky young man, Bill Russell decided, looked like he was going to do his replying with the two guns that hung at his hips.

Bill Russell smiled grimly, relaxed in the saddle to enjoy the spectacle. Bill Russell had seen his family murdered by law-backed range-hogs when he was a button of five, his father and his mother and the older of his two broth-

ers. He'd seen his other brother killed in a gunfight a year after that. Bill Russell had learned to know death at a very early age and he had learned that a man lived or died by his guns and he had not learned much that was sentimental.

That was why Bill Russell could never have explained what he did in the next minute. Maybe he was suddenly bored with the plain spectacle of just another colddeck murder. Maybe his trigger fingers, from not having been used lately, were itchy.

Both Bill Russell's black-handled guns, in any case, were suddenly in his hands and they were smashing .45 bullets in the direction of the scene at the little ranchhouse.

Bill Russell was too far away from the scene, anyone at all acquainted with guns would have said, for very accurate shooting with .45's. Withal, though, Bill Russell did pretty well. He fired six shots, three from each gun, and the stetsons of the gunmen leapt crazily off their heads, in the case of three of them, and dumped the stetson of the fourth onto the bridge of his nose.

There was a moment of hesitation thereafter, while Bill Russell sat with his guns in his two hands where they'd just finished their job of lead-throwing, while the four gunmen vacillated between grabbing their guns and shooting it out with this newcomer, and determining first what this was all about.

In the end, the four gunmen did neither. Apparently at a word from their leader, they picked up their stetsons and abruptly moved to their horses, swung aboard and moved back down the Watertown trail as directly as they'd come.

While Bill Russell sat his palomino with his two guns still riding in his palms, while Jim Barrett, the lanky young man on the veranda of the ranchhouse, witnessed the whole thing with unbelieving eyes.

"Holy smoke," Jim Barrett said. Bill Russell had put his guns away and he'd ridden up to the house.

"I didn't have any trouble figuring who those four customers were," Jim went on, "but I'll hang if I can begin to guess who you might be, stranger."

Bill Russell stepped down at the porch steps.

"The one thing I do know," Jim Barrett went on, "is that I owe my life to you, stranger." He let out a long breath that must have been tight-held during the whole visit of the gunmen. "Whew-ee! I'd been expecting those gentlemen, and I had myself all set in the mind for a shoot-out to the finish, but, golly, when the thing actually faces you, when you finally see that you're only seconds away from your grave, it doesn't look too good to you!"

Bill Russell said: "It doesn't, huh."

HE PULLED a match up his leg and lit a quirley that he'd been rolling with a thumb and forefinger.

Jim Barrett shifted his feet on the veranda, made a welcoming gesture with one hand.

"Well, come in," he said with a smile, "and I'll boil up a pot of coffee for you. Ham and eggs too, if you're hungry—"

Bill Russell blew out the match looking at Jim Barrett. He smiled not on the lips but in the eyes. But even in this Bill Russell was sneering first, smiling afterwards. And even with a ghost of a smile behind them, Bill Russell's cold grey eyes did not lose their bleakness.

"What's the matter," Bill Russell said softly, "having a little boundary trouble?"

Jim looked back over his shoulder as Bill Russell followed him into the house.

"Boundary trouble is right!" he said

with a little laugh. "All the way around!"

Bill Russell swung a leg over a chair at the table, and he took a long draw on his quirley.

"All the way around, eh?" he said.

"To put it in a very few words," Jim said, "I've got a very good waterhole here on my place, and I've got two neighbors who want it." He made the little laugh again, but it was less easy this time. "They want it so bad they're all set to have an all-out showdown fight for it—with me caught in the middle!"

"Oh?" Bill Russell said. After a moment he added: "Then what was this play with the four hardcases?"

Jim frowned.

"That," he said, "was probably a crew that Becker—he's one of these two 'neighbors'—sent to remove me. Becker has been trying to buy me out, and I've kept refusing to sell, and last week Becker warned me I better sell to him or else. This crew, I figure, was the 'or else.'"

"But how would putting you out of the picture help this Becker in a showdown with the other gent who wants your waterhole?"

Jim shrugged.

"I guess Becker figures the one who grabs my place first might have the best chance of hanging onto it. Becker knows a lot of big boys in politics, maybe he figures he could even make his claim stick legal if he once got hold of the place. Could maybe even get a U.S. Marshal or something to stop Carrington when he tried to move in behind guns—"

Bill Russell had paused in the act of putting the quirley between his lips again.

"Carrington, you say the other one's name is? The other one that wants your place?"

Jim nodded.

"Ed Carrington. He owns the town and about half the country around here, Becker owns just about all the rest of it. Me and one or two others are the only ranchers in these parts besides Carrington and Becker."

Bill Russell took a long draw on his quirley.

"Oh," he said.

"But how about you doing some talking for a change," Jim laughed. "Who, might I ask, do I owe my life to?"

Bill Russell's eyes played briefly over Jim's face. He didn't say anything. The mockery behind Bill Russell's eyes might have grown, perhaps, that was all.

And then Jim abruptly sobered. He had a stick of wood in his hand that he was about to put in the stove and he put the stove lid back on the stove slowly and looked at Bill Russell.

"Say," he said, "you're not one of the gunmen that Carrington's been importing, by any chance—"

A kind of smile mixed with mockery behind Bill Russell's eyes.

He said: "Who, me?" He shook his head almost imperceptibly. "I'm just a trail bum, son. I just happened to be passin' this way."

JAY BECKER was as unusually big as Ed Carrington was small. Jay Becker looked his part, he looked like a big man who planned to do big things.

And while the little range-grabber always smoked a big cigar, the big fellow always had a remnant of a cigarette hanging from his lips, the smoke trailing up his face, into his nose and eyes, quite unnoticed.

Jay Becker listened while his four gunmen talked. Then he said:

"That was Bill Russell."

One of the gunmen whistled softly at this.

Another one said, "You figure it was, eh?"

"I know it was," Jay Becker said. "Ed Carrington sent for him. The messenger he sent for him came and sold me the information a couple days ago."

This was out on the range, where the four gunmen had found Becker when they'd gotten back from their unsuccessful try at finishing Jim Barrett. The men sat their horses in the broiling hot sun, Becker's big horse kept moving his feet restlessly. For while Ed Carrington held all his conferences strictly behind closed doors, Jay Becker's men had come to know that their boss held his conferences wherever he happened to be at the time.

Jay Becker abruptly set his animal on the trail back to the houses.

He said over his shoulder, so that his men scarcely heard him:

"I'll take care of this Russell pronto. I'll put this Sunset Kid on him."

"We figured the gent was somebody who knew how to handle guns," one of the gunmen called after Becker in belated explanation, "but we never guessed it was anybody like that! We figured whoever it was, if he could handle guns the way he did at that distance, he wasn't a hombre it would be smart to mix with close-up . . ."

THE Sunset Kid had placed a pebble on top of one corral post, and another pebble on the next post, and a third pebble on a third post.

"Now watch this," he said to Jay Becker as the big rancher swung off his horse. "Keep your eye on the three pebbles."

"Forget the games, kid," Becker said, "I've got a real job for you."

The four gunmen had pulled up in the yard, were stepping down too. The Kid addressed them particularly.

"You sons are supposed to be gunmen—watch this and learn what being gun-wise really means."

Becker made an impatient gesture with one hand.

"Forget the games, forget the games! Now here's what I want you to do, kid—"

The Kid, however, was quite preoccupied with his gun-trick. Suddenly he was whirling, was palming both guns, the guns were hammering, one of them twice, the other one once, and the pebbles had left the tops of the corral posts.

The Kid turned on his heel holstering his Colts, beaming around at his audience.

"You gents ever seen gun artistry like that?" the Kid inquired. "I'll answer that for you. You have not!"

Becker had put his flat hand, the tips of the fingers of the hand, against the Kid's chest.

"Look, son," he said tensely, "I don't want to play, I'm tellin' you to listen to what I have to say—"

JAY BECKER must finally have put over the idea he had in mind to the Sunset Kid, because late that afternoon the Kid was jogging down the trail toward town.

A half hour before, some distance up ahead, at the fork, Bill Russell had turned into this same trail and had also headed for Watertown. Bill Russell had thanked Jim Barrett for the victuals, and Jim had thanked Russell two or three more times for saving his life, and Russell had given Jim a parting word of advice: get out there in your yard and limber up those guns; Russell had noticed that neither Jim's guns nor his holsters looked very smooth from use; grease those holsters, and get out there in your yard and practice lifting those guns out of those holsters fast.

And that was what Jim Barrett was doing when the Sunset Kid rode by: practicing with his guns. He'd gone out and started doing it pretty grimly;

fast guns might be some help to him if Becker or Carrington chose to try to get him out of the way in a quick-draw showdown, but neither of the landhogs, Jim knew, would stop at that even if he were able to shade any other gunmen that Becker or Carrington might put on him; in the end it would inevitably be an all-out showdown, with Jim squeezed in the middle . . .

But a man had to do what he could, however little that might be, if he hoped to survive; he had to do his very damnedest, and hope that Lady Luck might choose to smile with favor on his cause.

Jim Barrett humphed grimly, as he smashed lead from both guns again at the tin can he'd set up on a rock a hundred feet away and only clipped it off the rock with the second shot from his righthand gun; he'd need Lady Luck on his side, all right, and she'd have to be in especially good fettle . . .

The Sunset Kid pulled up his mount. He stopped dead in the trail at the fork and watched Jim in action until Jim noticed him and turned and looked at him and called,

"What can I do for you, friend?"

"What can *I* do for *you,* would be a better question," the Kid replied, turning the head of his horse toward Jim.

Jim stood there, spread-legged, careful, putting his guns back in leather. This smiling button didn't look like another lead-merchant that Becker might have sent, he certainly didn't look like a hired killer, yet Jim knew he had to be suspicious of everybody now, and the youngster was wearing guns.

"Meaning?" Jim said.

"Meaning," the Kid said, stepping down from the saddle and leading his horse the remaining few yards, "that you are just about the worst hand with a gun I've ever had the pleasure of witnessing in action."

Jim smiled in one corner of his mouth at this.

"I am, eh."

"You are." The Kid had moved over beside Jim, facing toward the tin can. "Put a pebble on top of that can," the Kid said, "and I'll show you what shooting is. And after that, maybe I'll give you a couple lessons in shooting."

Jim Barrett frowned at the Kid quizzically, the little smile still in the corner of his mouth. The Kid made a motion with his head.

"Go ahead, go ahead," the Kid said. "Put a pebble on top of the can."

It seemed pretty foolish, but Jim went and put the pebble on top of the can as the strange button instructed. He stepped back slowly, looked toward the Kid. It was funny, this didn't make any sense at all, yet this button somehow made it make sense.

"I don't know what your game is," Jim began, "but—"

"Now keep your eye on the pebble," The Kid interrupted.

It seemed pretty foolish, but Jim looked away from the Kid and watched the pebble. . . .

CARRINGTON was keeping himself hepped up to go through with the thing. He had gotten in a lather when his men had brought him word of Becker hiring-on the Sunset Kid, and he'd been in a lather more or less ever since. And now that Bill Russell had arrived, he was smashing right ahead with his plan to beat Becker to the Barrett waterhole.

Ed Carrington had gained all his power and wealth in the same manner. Periodically he had gotten himself in a lather and he'd stayed in the lather until he'd swept away another opponent, or swept in to take over a new range.

"Okay, let's go," he growled past his cigar and gigged his horse forward mercilessly. "You all know what you're

doin', I hope. I just want to say it'll be just too bad for any hombre who doesn't know what he's doin'."

The gun-army had been organized just outside the town, and it was breaking out of the clump it had formed now, and spreading out along the trail, moving ominously in the half-light of dusk in the direction of the Becker place. Carrington rode his horse awkwardly in the lead, his fat body balanced lumpily on top of his big mount, with Bill Russell the antithesis of the range-boss on his animal a few paces behind Carrington, with Carrington looking like a frantic, fat little bank president on his horse, with Bill Russell looking like the authentic reed-in-the-saddle hard-bitten Texan he was.

Carrington's plan was simple, as he'd explained it to his men: they would smash an all-out attack at the Becker place, with Bill Russell searching out and eliminating the Sunset Kid as quickly as possible.

"Sure, I know the Sunset Kid," Bill Russell had said quietly. "Who doesn't?"

And with Becker's forces scattered, perhaps completely smashed if things went well—for Carrington's information was that Becker had no more than fifty men in his hire, and no more than half of them were strictly gunmen, and Carrington was riding at the head of a gun-army that was almost a hundred strong and armed with both six-guns and saddle-rifles—with Becker beaten, Carrington would simply back-trail to the Barrett place and take it over, allowing Barrett to clear out in one piece, or eliminating him if he chose to argue; for it had long been common knowledge that all of Barrett's hands had quit him as it became clear that Carrington and Becker were building to a certain showdown over the Barrett waterhole.

"Okay, let's go," Carrington growled past his cigar again, though the gun-army was moving along rapidly now.

Bill Russell rode with his eyes narrowed, straight ahead. Bill Russell was keeping his mind on the business at hand, coldly, directly, but for some unexplainable reason an annoying thought kept playing in the back of his brain. For some unexplainable reason Bill Russell was not being able to shove thought of that youngster Jim Barrett out of his mind, and it had not helped things when Carrington had explained to his crew how ruthlessly he was going to wipe out young Barrett.

And it did not help things when the light of Jim Barrett's house became visible off to the right, as the gun-army neared the fork in the trail.

No, Bill Russell could not have explained the way he was thinking and acting all of a sudden in the past few hours. He couldn't have explained why he suddenly moved over beside Ed Carrington and said,

"I'm breaking away for about ten minutes. I'll join you again down the trail past the fork."

Carrington's horse went sideways more than forward as the range-boss whirled in the saddle and yanked the reins in the motion.

"You're *what?*"

"You hired me to eliminate the Sunset Kid, didn't you," Russell said quietly. "I've got an idea in that connection and I'm acting on it."

Carrington glared at Russell, as the whole army began to slow down behind the two.

"But what—" Carrington began, but Russell had already turned his horse's head and was moving away in the direction of the Barrett house.

CARRINGTON'S riders eddied to a halt around him. The men sat their mounts and watched, with their boss, Russell fade into the gloom that separated them from the single square

of light in the distance. . . .

Russell's eye were narrowed tighter than ever as he rode. It was as though he did not want to look at himself, at what he was doing, for fear it would embarrass him if he ever stopped to consider it.

For Bill Russell had no "idea" relative to the Sunset Kid at all. Bill Russell simply wanted to warn Jim Barrett of what was coming.

So Bill Russell was momentarily balked when he saw the horse hitched at Barrett's veranda—for he knew of course that Barrett would not leave his own horse there overnight.

And Bill Russell was not a little surprised when Jim Barrett opened the door to Russell's knock and there, standing in front of the fireplace squinting into the muzzle of a broken-down six-gun, was the Sunset Kid himself.

"Well, stranger!" Jim greeted." Welcome back!" Jim opened the door wider, grinning broadly. "What happened, you lose your way or something?"

Bill Russell was standing there just outside the doorway looking at the Sunset Kid. The Sunset Kid had glanced briefly at Russell and gone back to his examination of the gun-muzzle.

"Yeah," Bill Russell said after a moment, "I lost my way."

"Well, come in, come in!" Jim said. "You can stay the night, and in the morning you can untangle the local trails again!"

"Sure," Bill Russell murmured, keeping his eyes on the Sunset Kid.

He stepped into the house.

The Sunset Kid said: "No wonder you can't shoot, friend. Even I couldn't shoot with this gun."

The Sunset Kid showed the gun to Bill Russell.

"Look down that muzzle, stranger. You ever see a mess like that? Or don't you know guns, like my friend here?"

Bill Russell was briefly taken aback. He tensed, then relaxed, then glanced down the muzzle of the proffered weapon.

He said with a barely perceptible smile, "Sure, I know guns." He looked the Sunset Kid squarely in the eyes. "That muzzle's a mess, all right."

Jim Barrett looked back and forth from one to the other.

"Well, I can't introduce you two gentlemen, for the simple reason I don't know your names—!"

"Jones, is my name," Russell said. "Bill Jones."

The Sunset Kid flashed Russell a quick laugh.

"That's a likely statement, stranger!" he said. "Okay, your name is Jones, mine is Smith. Harry Smith!"

Bill Russell's eyes narrowed momentarily, but the thin smile came back immediately.

Jim Barrett gave a laugh too.

"Jones and Smith!" he laughed. "Well, I guess we won't have any trouble remembering those names!"

"No, I reckon we won't," the Sunset Kid said, busy with the broken-down gun.

"It ought to be pretty easy," Bill Russell said, "remembering those names."

They all looked at each other then in that moment, and all burst out laughing. Even Bill Russell's stiff face actually cracked in an actual laugh, even his cold grey eyes twinkled momentarily. . . .

Jim Barrett frowned amiably at the Sunset Kid as they all three relaxed into the chairs around the fireplace, Bill Russell rolling and lighting a quirley.

Jim said: "Mr. Jones told me what his business was in these parts, but you haven't said what yours is, Mr. Smith—"

THE Sunset Kid humphed, squinting up the gun barrel again. Bill Russell's eyes narrowed that scarcely perceptible bit again.

"My business in these parts, my friend, is gun-business." The Kid frowned back at Jim in a mock-serious sort of way. "You see, a couple local ranchers are having a range-war—probably you know about it. And they're set to have a showdown. And one of them, a Ed Carrington, has hired-on a gun expert by the name of Bill Russell, and the other one, a gentleman by the name of Jay Becker, has hired-on yours truly."

The Sunset Kid paused, put the gun aside carelessly on a bench getting to his feet. Bill Russell had taken a careful, tense drag on his cigarette. Jim Barrett's lips had tightened into a thin line.

"As a matter of fact," the Sunset Kid went on, "I've got to be moving along and taking care of my gun-business." He grinned at Bill Russell and at Jim Barrett. "Because what I'm supposed to be doing at this very moment is hanging around the Watertown saloon until this Bill Russell shows up. Because though I don't know what he looks like except from the boss's description which wasn't a very good description, the boss says Bill Russell will recognize me and go for his guns the moment he lays eyes on me. And at that moment—" the Kid widened his grin "—is when I go into action and blast Mr. Russell into boothill!"

JAY BECKER might have noticed the change that had come over his step-daughter in the past few days under ordinary circumstances, but what was going on presently on Water range could hardly have been called ordinary circumstances. The destiny of Water range was at stake, nothing less, and Jay Becker was wholly involved in taking a hand in this.

And then, Marjorie had never really been more than a pawn in Becker's main prepossession, his ruthless drive for empire. Marjorie had been his wife's child by a former husband, so Becker never felt a blood tie to her.

And it was the fact that she was not Becker's blood kin, that she was only his step-daughter, that was preoccupying Marjorie.

She had been riding out at dawn these days, after a scant breakfast, and she had been returning at dusk; and in the tension that was building to the Water range showdown, nobody took much notice of this. . . .

The soft evening breeze toyed with the soft waves of her auburn hair as she moved slowly back along the trail this evening. Her eyes were narrowed, and they plainly showed the sleepless nights Marjorie had passed. Her chin had a determined set to it, as though she had to hold it that way consciously to keep it from trembling. Her red lips had a set cast about them too, as though for the same reason.

Yes, Marjorie Becker had always been a child of the rich, she had spent a protected life, and it was not easy for such a young lady to face the responsibility of becoming a woman in her own right.

And so Marjorie kept confusing the issue, kept telling herself that after all Jay Becker was her father, and he had brought her up, and she did owe a great deal to him, certainly at least loyalty—when deep down inside she knew she owed him nothing, that she was nothing to him, that he had only used her for his own selfish purposes, that he was not her real father but her step-father . . .

She tossed her head and leaned a little forward in the saddle and took a firm hold on the reins but without quickening the pace of her horse. She

set her lips tighter and Marjorie Becker tried very hard to think, tried very hard to become a woman . . .

She was shaken from her reverie roughly by her arrival on the outskirts of the clearing around the Becker houses, for though it was nearly dark now, the tense activity in progress here had a solid quality that one contacted like a stone wall.

Men were readying horses and saddles and guns on all sides. Every man in Becker's employ must have been assembled here. The men glanced at Marjorie briefly, without greeting, when they took notice of her at all.

Marjorie found her heart pounding furiously. She knew too well what this meant, to the range, to Jim Barrett, to her . . .

SHE saw her father then, the eternal cigarette dripping off his lower lip, moving on horseback among the men giving brief instructions. And when a moment later he saw her, he gigged his mount quickly to her side and growled,

"Get in the house, Marjorie, and stay there. I'm moving in on Carrington before he moves in on me. He's bringing in more gunmen every day, and the sooner I strike the better it's going to be for me.

"I've sent the Sunset Kid ahead to take care of Carrington's top hireling, Bill Russell, and I'm planning now to move into the town right on the Kid's heels."

Becker paused, glanced around tensely. Though he had looked at her to say this, Marjorie knew that he had not really seen her. And he had not explained his plans as a favor to her, as a token of kinship or confidence; rather, Marjorie knew, he was merely reviewing aloud his own thoughts, reciting his plans aloud in order to crystallize them in his own mind . . .

It was at the moment that Jim Barrett opened his front door to emit the Sunset Kid that Marjorie swung down off her horse at the veranda steps, well before she had brought the animal to a full stop.

Jim Barrett had not spoken at the Kid's revelation of his mission at the saloon in Watertown, and neither had Bill Russell. Their manners had become suddenly cold, but this was not a thing that the Sunset Kid would have noticed. The Kid had snapped the brim of his stetson, grinned at Russell and at Jim, and started out the door.

And had stopped there at the threshold at sight of Marjorie Becker, had beamed.

"Well!" the Kid said. "And what are you doing in these parts at this hour, Miss Becker? Does your papa know about this? I would expect not!"

Marjorie, to be sure, was a great deal more surprised at the sight of the Kid here than he was at sight of her.

"But what are *you*—doing *here!*" she stammered.

And Jim Barrett was probably more surprised than either of them.

Jim said: "Marjorie—" And became speechless therewith. And looked from Marjorie to the Kid.

But Marjorie had at that moment seen Bill Russell through the door.

"And you," she murmured, half pointing at Russell, "I know who you are. I know from the wanted dodger my father has in his office. Bill Russell, aren't you." She looked from one to the other in complete puzzlement. "But what in heaven's name are *you*—" pointing at the Kid "—and *you*—" pointing at Russell "—*both* doing *here*—!"

The Sunset Kid had turned to look back into the house with a big smile.

"Why, Mr. *Jones!*" he exclaimed "You deceived us! You gained our friendship and confidence under false

pretenses! Of course—" the Kid turned blithely to Marjorie, who was running very nervous fingers back through her hair, and to Jim, who was standing braced on straddled legs, as though ready to go for his lefthand gun, which was in its holster, looking in bafflement from one to the other of the gunmen "—of course, I was not without deceit myself, being the Sunset Kid and calling myself 'Mr. Smith'!"

Bill Russell was standing near the fireplace as still as stone. The Sunset Kid completed his half turn so that he was facing Russell squarely.

"Okay, Mr. Jones!" the Kid beamed, "why don't you go for your guns? Like my boss said you would at sight of me?"

That was when the sound of the shooting first crashed in on them. There was a single sharp rifle shot, then another, then all hell seemed to break loose.

BILL RUSSELL turned his head in the direction of the sound. The Sunset Kid did too, not altering his wide grin.

"Now what in hell is that," the Kid asked.

Jim Barrett whirled toward the front door, sprung onto the veranda.

And Marjorie put out a restraining hand suddenly toward Jim.

"Jim!" she cried. "Don't!" She followed him onto the veranda. "Jim!" she whispered, "it's the showdown! My father was planning to attack Carrington, and evidently Carrington was planning to attack at almost the same moment! Jim, I came because—"

Jim turned back toward Marjorie from peering into the night toward the sounds of gunfire.

He said, "Well, thank you for coming to warn me—but you better get away from here now as fast as possible—"

Marjorie was shaking her head slowly. Jim had started to look back toward the battle noise, but his eye had caught the motion of Marjorie's head and he'd frowned at her in puzzlement.

"I'm staying here, Jim," Marjorie said softly. "I've been doing an awful lot of thinking, an awful lot, and—and a conclusion I came to was—was that when this showdown came—I wanted to be with you."

The Sunset Kid had come onto the veranda, Bill Russell had followed him on stiff legs, never taking his eyes off the back of the Kid's head. The flashes of gunflame could be seen now, in the direction of the trail fork, and the Kid said:

"It looks like, Mr. Jones, that our bosses have gone ahead with their war without us!"

Bill Russell relaxed the least bit the hard way he was gripping his teeth together. He turned his eyes in the direction of the gun battle, left them there.

"It does that, doesn't it," he murmured.

Jim had not taken his puzzled gaze from Marjorie. He said simply:

"Marjorie, but you can't—"

"Oh but I can," she said. "Oh but I can, Jim."

And she took his big left hand in her right hand, and it was he that gripped her slender fingers this time.

"But my gosh Marjorie—" he began.

A bullet interrupted whatever more Jim might have said. A bullet tore a large piece of the door frame off and flipped it into the house.

Marjorie gripped Jim's hand hard, glancing suddenly at the Sunset Kid and Bill Russell.

"You, Mr. Russell—and you, Mr. Sunset Kid—" She began tensely, "will you both please forget—forget yourselves, or money, or whatever it is that gunmen live for—and do a very fine thing—"

"Just call us Mr. Jones and Mr.

Smith," the Kid interposed pleasantly.

"Seriously, t h o u g h, gentlemen," Marjorie implored, "Mr. Barrett and I are—are engaged to be married—and our only chance is here, here on Mr. Barrett's place—and our only chance for any life together at all is a very slim fighting one—because whoever wins that gun battle out there will come here next—"

"Here?" the Kid said. "Why here?"

A phrase of Marjorie's had stuck in Bill Russell's brain. It must have been a phrase that Bill Russell had been searching for himself, without knowing that he was, because it brought a smile to Bill Russell's lips, a very rare smile —a smile, in fact, of a sort Bill Russell had never known—a peaceful smile.

Or whatever it is that gunmen live for. That was it. That explained Bill Russell's very peculiar, in his own judgment, recent actions in Jim Barrett's connection:

A gunman had nothing to live for, but he yearned for something just like any other human being. He knew that finally and inevitably his guns wouldn't be fast enough and he'd be blasted into boothill, but before he died he wanted somehow to have given his life some meaning. And it had been this deep-down yearning that had pushed to the surface of Bill Russell's brain when he had first seen Jim Barrett in trouble. Bill Russell had yearned for something to live for, and helping a youngster in trouble had somehow gratified his craving . . .

BILL RUSSELL'S steel-grey eyes were on the Kid.

He said to the Kid: "Evidently, friend, your boss—"

"Smith is the name," the Kid said, "Mr. Smith."

Bill Russell grinned slowly.

"Okay, Mr. Smith. What I was saying, Mr. Smith, was that your boss evidently did not give you the whole story, any more, for that matter, than mine did to me." He tossed his head in Jim Barrett's direction. "Jim Barrett is the owner of the best waterhole in these parts, and this whole showdown war is for Jim's waterhole."

Marjorie was nodding: "And since Carrington owns the Watertown law and court, Jim's—I mean Jim's and my—only chance is to stand and fight off whichever—"

"Whichever landhog wipes out the other landhog," the Kid helped, "and comes for Mr. Barrett's waterhole." The Kid nodded in a little bow toward Russell. "My thanks to you, Mr. Jones, for setting me straight on this point."

Another rifle bullet smashed at the house, thudded in the wall above the door. The Kid looked at it. Then he looked at Jim and Marjorie. Then he looked at Bill Russell. He was always smiling pleasantly.

Bill Russell had held his slow grin too, and it did not alter when the Kid said:

"Okay, what do you say, Mr. Jones? Who needs our services more, our landhog bosses, or the future Mr. and Mrs. Barrett?"

Bill Russell said softly: "I'll let you answer that, Mr. Smith."

The Sunset Kid beamed at Jim and Marjorie. Two more bullets whined by, one of them tore out a front window.

"Okay, my friends, you have a gun army! The Barrett spread will be staunchly defended!"

Marjorie's eyes glistened as she smiled back at the Kid, she did not reply but she did not have to.

And Jim said hoarsely, "Well, gosh, gentlemen—!"

Bill Russell ducked his head as he felt a bullet pull at his hat brim.

He said: "Mebbeso a good idea right

now would be to duck inside and try a shade of forting up."

And that was pretty much how the destiny of Water range was settled. Ed Carrington's gun army wiped out Jay Becker's crew, and with what was left of his gun army, Ed Carrington moved in immediately on Jim Barrett.

But, of course, Jim Barrett had his gun army too, and it was a fresh gun army, and it was raring to go, and though Jim Barrett's gun army was very short on ammunition, it carefully made every bullet count.

Early in the battle, for example, the Sunset Kid earmarked one of his bullets for Ed Carrington himself, and when the Sunset Kid earmarked a bullet for something, the bullet was never wasted.

And Ed Carrington's gun army, without its leader, and already depleted from the showdown with Becker, did not have much stomach for pressing the attack after the Sunset Kid's notable little job of bullet-earmarking.

So that was how Water range became free country again; with the strangle hold of the two range-barons who had ruled it for too many years at last broken, Water range found free elections and an honest law court in order again. . . .

Jim and Marjorie Barrett built up one of Water range's most prosperous ranches.

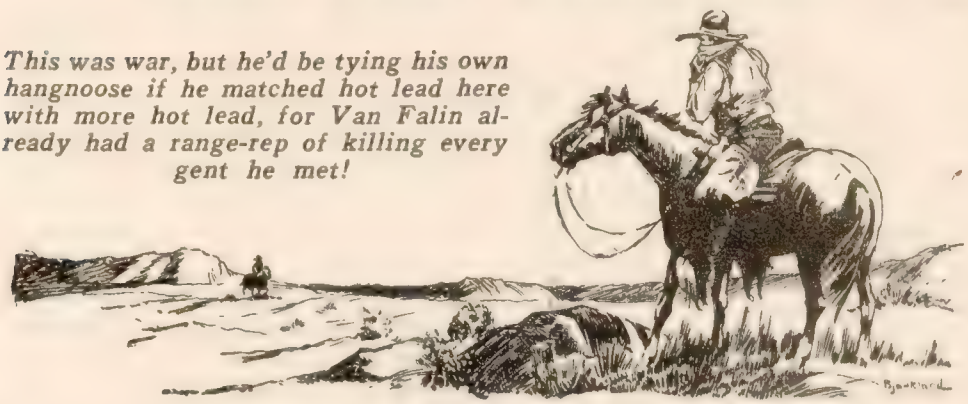
On long winter evenings Jim and Marjorie Barrett would tell their two boys the story of the gun army that had helped their father and mother save the Barrett place back in the beginning. Where was their gun army now, the boys would ask over and over—and they could never quite understand how *two men* could be called a *gun army*. They had never seen their gun army again, Jim would tell the boys; they had ridden away that same night and Jim and Marjorie had never heard from them again. Would they ever hear from them again, the boys would ask?

Sure we will, Jim would tell his sons; one of these days Mr. Jones and Mr. Smith will come riding right into our yard, and we'll have a real celebration then, I can tell you . . .

The Kid They Called A Killer

SMASH NOVELET by HASCAL GILES

This was war, but he'd be tying his own hangnoose if he matched hot lead here with more hot lead, for Van Falin already had a range-rep of killing every gent he met!



CHAPTER I

RIDE THE MAN DOWN

BLOOD splattered down from the half-loft of the weathered line shack and fell in a warm splotch on the back of Van Falin's gloved hand as he stood silently in the center of the floor and cast his eyes around for a place to hide. The sight of it made him shiver despite the warm tingle of excitement inside him. He flung a hasty glance above him and whistled in horror as he saw the widening circle of crimson on the overhead bunk, another dark drop forming between the narrow cracks in the ceiling.

A quick glance through the dirty window told him he had no time to investigate the loft. Whatever was up there could wait; but the advancing ring of angry cowmen outside could not. For the past ten minutes he had seen them moving in, skipping for cover, drawing nearer and nearer—ten enraged, gun-hung fighting men who were holding him directly responsible for the death of Orebank's sheriff, Alf Hooker, and for the mysterious disappearance of Lin Johnson who carried five thousand dollars of the ranchers' money.

Thirty yards away, Van saw a large black sombrero pop up from the chaparral and he recognized it as belonging to Big Lafe Belkins. A moment later, the hulking rancher leaped from cover and ran a few steps forward, his red-checked shirt making an easy target in the late Texas sunshine. Now Van knew who was leading the band as the others followed close on Big Lafe's heels. And he knew why.

Big Lafe was out there spurring the men on, piling up new charges against Van Falin and whipping the men into a murderous furry with his deep, booming voice which had the power to take men under its control by its bellowing volume if for no other reason. The reason Big Lafe Belkins was doing this was because he hated Van Falin with the force which only a prejudiced man can hate—hated him because a few months ago Van had been fighting with the Federals while Orebank's men fought on the Confederate side, hated him because he had the nerve to take over the Rocking F ranch which was owned by his uncle before he was killed at Vicksburg, hated him because Lin Johnson slept in Van's room the night he had disappeared.

Van's first impulse was to snap a shot at the big man when he broke into the open, but he passed up the opportunity and gave himself a mental berating for leaving his father's spread in Montana to run the Rocking F. There was nothing left of the ranch

after the war. While Orebank's better citizens had taken up arms to fight with Lee, the weak and cruel and greedy had stayed home to pursue a more profitable course. Rustling, looting and robbing was an unhampered occupation with few men left on the range to protect their property. After the surrender, ranchers came back to grown-over ranges, clogged water holes and empty corrals.

THE deadly whine of a rifle bullet cut short Van's self-styled browbeating and the short chunky cowboy hit the floor a moment after the slug shattered the window pane and thudded angrily into the logs of the opposite wall. Van did not answer the shot. Circumstantial evidence was already heavy against him. If he killed one of the ranchers he knew he'd be tying his own hangnoose.

Something warm splashed on the back of Van's neck and his mind was jerked back to the eerie loft above. Another shot tore into the cabin wall, this time from a six-gun, and Van knew the men were closer. But now his mind was on something else and he ignored the increasing gunfire as he crawled toward the ladder in the corner of the room. His ears caught a faint groan of pain as he started to climb and he knew there was a wounded man in the cabin as he had suspected at first.

Van blinked his eyes uncertainly in the increased dimness, then he saw the figure huddled on the straw in the center of the large bunk. Kneeling beside the unconscious form, he had to bend close to recognize the face.

"Ames Finley!" he grunted in surprise.

Van ripped the man's shirt off and looked at his wound, a clean bullet hole through his thin left shoulder. The puddle of blood beneath him was the key to his unconsciousness. Working feverishly, the trapped cowboy formed a neat bandage from his neckerchief and put a stop to the wound's bleeding. Then he bathed Finley's face in the water left in his canteen. But not until he had found the whiskey flask in the man's back pocket and had forced a drink down him, did Ames show any signs of life. His eyes fluttered open for a moment and he moved his lips as if to speak. Then he became limp again.

The sound of the shooting died now and the silence made Van remember it for the first time since he had climbed into the loft. He knew rest was all that could help Ames Finley for a while, so he swung down to the cabin floor again. As he hit the floor, the front door burst open and Big Lafe Belkins rushed in.

Van swung his ham-like fist without thinking, catching Belkins on the point of his chin and tumbling him back before he had a chance to use the colt he had in his hand. Belkins' two hundred thirty pounds smacked against the two men crowding in behind him. All three of them went to their knees from the force of the blow. Van ducked nimbly as another rancher dived at him through the window. He slapped the man senseless with a swinging backhand blow when he started to rise from the floor.

But his trouble increased as more possemen piled in through the doorway and circled around him as Big Lafe Belkins charged from the front with a bellow of rage.

Dodging a fist thrown at him from the left, Van took the full force of Big Lafe's first blow to his mouth. The salty taste of blood ran over his tongue as his lips flattened painfully against his teeth. Van fought like a madman after that! He lashed out with the toe of his boot, sank his foot into Big

Lafe's pulpy belly. Hopping around like a tumbleweed, he threw punches in every direction at once, always meeting a target as the numbers increased. He moved away deceptively to let one of his assailants take a blow aimed at him by Big Lafe.

Then Van Falin clipped the hefty leader on the ear with a bone-jarring jab with his left hand.

His eyes became swollen and blurred with blood within a minute and his mouth was numb from bruises. But he kept fighting until a hand grabbed his arms from behind, pinning them to his back. Big Lafe Belkins' clubby fist was on its way when this happened. It exploded like a rocket in Van's face and he sank to the floor amid a shower of stars and brain-pricking flashes of light.

When Van Falin regained consciousness, he was not surprised to find himself in jail. It was dark outside and Van was glad for that. He didn't believe his eyes could stand light, weak and painful as they were. He ran his his tongue over his lips and winced from the sting it left. Arising stiffly from his cot, he walked to the cell door and gazed thoughtfully at the sleeping deputy. There was something he wanted to ask Deputy Craig Sloan but his dimmed mind was slow in recalling it.

Finally, after going over the events at the cabin, he remembered.

At his call, Sloan rubbed sleep from his eyes and came slowly to his cell, still limping a little from a bullet-smashed knee suffered in the war. Sloan was a big man, blue-eyed with a shock of tousled blond hair. He was one of the two men whom Van had known in Orebank before he inherited his uncle's ranch. Ames Finley was the other. Van had never cared much for Finley, but he considered Craig Sloan his friend.

THE DEPUTY tugged whimsically at the lobe of his ear and grinned a slow grin. "You sure are a sight for the undertaker," he drawled around the cud of chewing tobacco which he never parted with even in his short cat-naps. "That's where you almost came to rest, too, amigo. I had to do some tall talking to them ranchers before they'd let me lock you up. Big Lafe Belkins was all for weighin' you at the end of a rope. Finally I got you in my keeping by telling them it'd be too easy on you going out while you was still unconscious!"

Van tried to grin at Craig Sloan's attempt at humor. "What I woke you up to find out is, did Lafe and his men bring in Ames Finley?"

A questioning look spread over the deputy's long face. "Bring him in from where?" he asked. "The last time I saw him he was at the meeting the other night when you fellers agreed on his suggestion to take up a collection and send Lin Johnson up north to buy some new breed stock."

"Then you better go out and get him yourself, Craig. He's out in the loft of that old line shack on the east range and he's shot."

The deputy's face colored with anger at mention of Finley and Van knew he was remembering an old battle on the banks of the lower Mississippi. Van's company had been short of men and hard-pressed. Sloan and Findley had been wounded. The lanky deputy's punctured knee had only served to make him fight harder; but Ames Finley had demanded to be taken to the field hospital. A few days later he obtained a medical discharge and went home. He never returned, prolonging his exaggerated illness until the war was won. The men in camp had mentioned his name only in curses after that. Curses on a yellow dog.

Craig Sloan looked hard at Van for a moment and said: "You didn't shoot

him, too—did you, Van?"

The square-shouldered little cowboy behind the bars snorted angrily. He had heard so many accusations directed at him in the last few hours that his temper had reached a boiling point. "Holy Smokes! You don't think I'm going around killing everybody I meet, do you?"

"No," Sloan replied. "I don't believe you've killed anybody. But I would like to know how everything points so straight to you."

"Nobody's even asked me to explain," Van said bitterly. "It was like this: After the meeting, Lin Johnson and me took a room together in the hotel. About two o'clock Lin woke me up and said somebody downstairs was yelling for him. He took my gun with him in case it was some kind of trick. I was about half asleep when I heard a couple of shots and the sound of a horse pounding out of town. Naturally, I grabbed my spare colt and ran down to see what was coming off. The sheriff was outside dead, so I took out in search of the killer. I was still out there this afternoon when Belkins and his men sneaked up on me, accused me of all the dirty work and started slinging lead. I gave 'em the slip, but they finally caught up with me."

Craig Sloan stared thoughtfully at the floor for a moment. At last he said, "I believe you're telling the truth, Van. But I still can't make nothing of it. I'll mull over it while I go out and get that yellow-livered Finley. He'd be safe there till morning, though, because people like him don't die."

"If you're talking about me, you won't have to go to no trouble," Ames Finley said from the doorway. He had pushed in unnoticed and stood leaning against the wall, the lamplight gleaming on his naked shoulders. The wounded man had used the remainder of his shirt to form a sling for his left arm.

"How'd you get here," Craig Sloan asked curiously. "From what Van told me I thought you was bad hurt."

Finley's face was drawn and haggard, his eyes dulled from pain. But he put on a rough front now that he knew medical aid was near. "Just a scratch," he scoffed. "I found a horse picketted near the cabin and I rode him in. Somebody told me it belonged to Van Falin, so it must've been him that helped me today." He shifted his eyes to the cowboy and said, "Much obliged, Falin."

CHAPTER II

Mob Law

VAN nodded in understanding and the skinny, dark-haired man turned to leave. He stopped when Craig Sloan moved away from the cell, asking him a question.

"How'd you get that slug in your shoulder," Sloan asked suspiciously. "Since I'm the only law around here now, I'd kind of like to keep count of the powder being burned around Orebank."

Finley's thin mustache seemed to darken in contrast to the change of color in his naturally pale face. Then he leaned close to Craig, spoke in a confidential tone which Van was barely able to hear. "I was planning on working this out myself, but I guess I should tell you. I was doing my best to help Van out of this jam. You see, I was on the same side as you fellows during the war and I think we should stick together in this thing—"

"Get to the point," the deputy interrupted. "The war's over now and I'm tired hearing about it. I'll admit that's one of the big things Lafe Belkins holds against Van. If you or me had made a

mis-step he'd be yelling Yankee devil at us, too."

"That's what I'm driving at," Ames Finley continued in his silky tones. "I believe Big Lafe is using his dislike for Falin to cover up his own dirty work. This morning I picked up a trail of two horses. One looked like it was carrying double and it led toward Big Lafe's spread. A half mile from his place, two masked men came out of the brush after me. A bullet winged me in the shoulder and that's all I remember until I came to in the loft of that cabin."

Craig Sloan's eyes widened in surprise when Ames Finley had finished his explanation and the slow-moving deputy motioned the man on his way without comment. Then he went back to his chair, put his feet on the desk, and prepared to rest his mind in sleep. Things were getting too complicated for him.

Van's own mind was too troubled even to attempt sleep. He knew he was spending his last night in jail. Unless something was done, he was spending his last night anywhere. By morning the ranchers would be filled with lust for his life. Big Lafe Belkins would see to that. And his death would be a symbol, a symbol that the war was not won. It would mean that any northerner who came to Orebank to seek a livelihood would suffer from the example. A newcomer would be considered a Yankee, not an American with the right to live where he chose. To prove this right gave Van Falin a new incentive to fight back.

But there was more to the fight than a war-born prejudice. Sheriff Alf Hooker had been killed and Van's six-gun had been found near his body. The night before that, Orebank's leading ranchers had held a meeting, drawn notes on their spreads and pooled the money to buy new breed stock. Lin Johnson was designated to make the purchase. Van was the last to see him before he disappeared from the hotel room which they had shared in town. It was easy to understand the ranchers' suspicions of him.

There were other parts to the puzzle. Only one bullet was found in Alf Hooker's heart. Van was positive he heard two shots and the lawman's holster was empty when he was found. Who was to profit from the present mix-up, Van wondered. Had Lin Johnson deliberately fled with the money? Or did Big Lafe Belkins hold cards in the deal?

Van found himself pondering over the story Ames Finley had told. Big Lafe had more money and more range than any man in Orebank, Van knew. Twice he had offered to buy the Rocking F, hoping to get rid of his Yankee neighbor. Could he be Lin Johnson's kidnapper? If he was, most of the other ranchers would go broke. Big Lafe could wait until the notes came due, buy them from the bank and own interest in half the ranches in Orebank. But Ames Finley had money, too. In addition to his spread north of town, Finley owned the Jingle Spur Saloon, an enterprise which was always profitable.

The shuffling of Craig Sloan's feet on the desk top brought Van's thoughts back to his own predicament. The long-legged deputy sat up suddenly, wide awake. He cocked his ear toward the window in a listening attitude. Loosening his twin colts in their holsters, he walked to the window and looked out, a worried frown darkening his face.

"They're coming, Van," he said over his shoulder. "I been expecting it for an hour."

Van caught the sound, now, an angry murmur far down the street and the stamping of many feet. He swallowed hard in an attempt to rid his throat of the sudden tight feeling which seemed to be choking him. His heart began to skip madly and the cowboy didn't try

to tell himself that he wasn't scared. He'd seen mobs work before and he had no desire to be the victim of the fate which they dealt.

"What are you going to do, Craig," Van asked softly, hiding his nervousness.

"Nothing," the deputy replied, looking at the floor when he answered rather than face the cold, contemptuous eyes of his prisoner. "There's nothing I can do, Van," he continued hastily as if he were arguing with himself.

CRAIG leaned against Van's cell, his eyes flitting from the cowboy inside to the waving torches which could be seen through the window. He seemed to be measuring the odds in this deadly game. But Van Falin did not give him time to reach any further decision. Catching the lawman off guard, Van grabbed the man's head from behind and yanked it back against the bars. Craig Sloan wilted to the floor like an icicle in a branding fire.

The mob was closer now, and Van could hear the curses of the men as they reviewed aloud the charges against him. Sweat popped out on his ruddy face as he reached through the bars and tore recklessly at the deputy's pockets in search for the keys. He finally found them in the man's vest and then spent another precious five seconds fumbling for the one that would unlock his cell. When he found it and stepped free, his heart took on a sinking sensation as he realized he'd been too late. Boots were already pounding up the front steps.

He ran down the short corridor to the rear door, grabbing his colt from the peg on the wall as he went. As he slid the bolt back, the door pushed inward, smacked him in the face. Before he could overcome the surprise at finding himself surrounded, something hard pressed his stomach and a lanky, squint-eyed hombre with sideburns said, "Drop it, mister!"

Van knew surrender would gain him nothing and he refused to let the number bluff him. Swinging his colt-hand sharply upward he heard the gunman's wrist crack as the six-gun sailed out of his hand. The man yelled in pain and Van dived for the door. Guns and fists slashed down at him, leaving cuts and bruises all over him as he plowed toward the outside. As his feet hit the sand of the alley, a volley of lead tore into the earth about him. Van whirled desperately and snapped three quick shots into the walls above the mob. They melted back to seek cover and Van started to run for his life.

A horseman skidded around the corner of the building then and the cowboy knew escape was hopeless. The whistle of a rope cut the air and Van tried to hit the ground. He was caught in mid-air by invisible force and held there as the hungry noose bit into his body. He gritted his teeth in pain as the rider galloped past him, the rope throwing him down and dragging him along the stone-studded earth. By the time the horse slid to a halt, Van was praying for unconsciousness to relieve the pain of his torn and bleeding body.

A yell from the sheriff's office was evidence that relief was not far away. The relief of death! Men crowded around him. Angry hands jerked him to his feet and he made no move to resist them as they bound him and hoisted him roughly into a saddle. Van saw Big Lafe Belkins for the first time as the giant rancher tossed a hangnoose over his head and settled it around his neck, slapped the horse's rump and started down the street toward the cottonwood grove at the end of town. Big Lafe was determined to make sure of the job because he held stubbornly to the other end of the rope all the way. When the tree was reached, it was he who draped

the rope across the limb and made it fast to the trunk.

The task completed, Big Lafe stood back from Van's mount and said, "You got anything to say, Falin?"

For a moment the growling, jeering mob grew silent, waiting for the doomed man's last words. Van was no longer scared. There was nothing except boiling, helpless anger in his eyes as his burning gaze swept over the upturned faces.

Falin had nothing to say and the knotted muscles in his set jaws told them so.

Then someone spoke for him!

"Untie that rope, Belkins," said a hard, drawling voice from the darkness. "Cut him down or I'll cut you down with lead."

Refusing to believe their ears, the mob turned as one man. A lone rider sat twenty yards away astride a sturdy black stallion. His white sombrero was pulled low over his eyes, a mask covered most of his face. But the nickel-plated colt which he held in each hand was in plain view and the fingers looked tight on the triggers.

Belkins and the others were too surprised to go for their guns. Van felt the rope grow loose and he dug his heels into the pony's flanks, guiding it toward his benefactor with his knees. The masked gunman emptied his right hand colt above the crowd's head and then loped away with Van Falin close on his heels.

He slowed down enough to reach over and jerk the loop which was holding Van's hands behind his back and then they both rode faster as Van grabbed the pony's reins.

A bullet tugged at Van's shirt sleeve as the men behind them got their guns in action. Other shots boomed before Van and the rider were swallowed up by the prairie to escape the range of the flying lead.

CHAPTER III

FRAME-UP

OUTSIDE the town, they stretched their mounts into a long lope, doubled sharply to the north and headed for the badlands. Van looked curiously at the man beside him and grinned happily as the rider ripped his mask off to disclose the jutting jaw and crinkled eyes of Deputy Craig Sloan.

Van signaled for a halt when the sound of pursuing hoofbeats which had been following them subsided. "You're sticking your neck out for trouble, Craig," Van said huskily. "No use in both of us getting in wrong with this town, so you'd better hightail it back before they find out who stole their prisoner."

Sloan munched his cud and squirted a stream of tobacco juice into the darkness. "I ain't forgetting the time you crawled out to get me when I was wounded in battle, Van. Anyway, there's no use me holding on to a badge when Big Lafe and the others start taking the law into their own hands."

"If that's the way you feel, I'm glad it's me you're sticking by," Van declared as he tightened his grip on the reins. "Let's get going."

"We ain't riding into the badlands," Sloan said as the cowboy moved toward the shadowy clumps of lava ahead. "That's the very place the ranchers will be searching for us in the morning. We're going to your ranch instead."

Van was too bruised and battered to argue. His aching body was groaning for rest and he could think of no place he'd rather be than in his own bed. As he wheeled his horse and followed the lawman, his mind was still searching through a blinding fog for the cause of

all the punishment which he had taken.

When they rode into the Rocking F ranchyard, Van Falin was asleep in the saddle, his head lolling against his chest. Craig Sloan woke him dragging him out of the saddle. Van summoned his last store of strength to walk to the door of the house.

"I got to get you patched up and to bed," Craig mumbled in his ear. "We'll have to pull out of here by morning."

Van leaned weakly against the wall of the house while Craig Sloan fumbled with the latch. The door was unlocked, Van knew, and he wondered vaguely why the deputy was having so much trouble. Then Sloan put his shoulder to the door and shoved it open and Van saw what was holding it. The body of a man was piled against it!

Stepping over the crumpled form they squeezed inside and Van waited breathlessly for the lawman to light the lamp. The sound of Sloan's thumbnail scratch of the match was loud in the ghostly silence of the room. The flame flared in his hand and then flickered out before Van could focus his bleary vision on the form at his feet. He heard the rustle of the lawman's clothes as he fumbled for another match. This time he got the lamp lit and both men sucked in their breath in a sharp wheeze of unbelief at what they saw.

Lin Johnson lay there in the hall of the Rocking F ranchhouse, his flowing white hair and grizzled mustache matted with blood from the hole in his skull which was the size and shape of the butt of a sixgun.

Anger brought new strength to Van Falin's veins as he tore his eyes away from the dead man and faced Craig Sloan. The lawman's eyes were boring into the cowboy's face, hard and unreadable.

"Go ahead and say it," Van snapped in disgust. "Accuse me of this, too."

"Shut up," Craig Sloan said. "I'm thinking and it ain't about you. Somebody has made the mistake that anybody with two good eyes could read through without halfway trying. The frame-up that somebody is trying to plant on you is just a little too evident. No guilty person could make that many mistakes.

Van breathed a sigh of relief and felt thankful that there was at least one man in Orebank who was still using his power to think. Together they rolled the body over and examined the contents of the man's pockets. They found Lin Johnson's watch, his wallet, some old letters and his money belt. The five thousand dollars was missing.

AFTER they had given up hope, Craig Sloan said, "I think I'll ride back to Orebank and assume my official duties. You stay here till morning and then get under cover while I get things straightened out. I aim to arrest Lafe Belkins on what Ames Finley told us and see if I can get anything out of him."

Van nodded in understanding and walked over to his bunk and sprawled across the top of it. The gangling deputy lifted Lin Johnson's body from the floor and carried it outside to his horse, tied it behind his saddle and returned. Craig Sloan spent the next fifteen minutes heating water and washing Van Falin's numerous wounds before he put bandages on the worst of the cuts. Then he tossed a six-gun on the bunk beside the exhausted cowboy and headed back toward Orebank. The receding sound of his horse's hoofs barely crept into Van's sleep-drugged mind, sounding like part of a dream.

The lamp was still flaming in its wall socket and showering the room with waving shadows when Van Falin woke two hours later. Darkness crowded against the windows and a call from a

night bird drifted through the silence. Van had not slept long and he was glad he had wakened when he did. For his mind had not slept with his body and some inner sense had forced him into wakefulness with a sudden inspiring thought.

He began to think in a methodical way as he rubbed sleep from his swollen eyes. There was a thin trail of blood leading from the spot where Lin Johnson's body had lain to the back door of his house. But the trail did not lead from where the dead man's head had rested. The dark brown stains began farther away and Van suddenly grasped the thought which had awakened him. Whoever put Lin Johnson's body against the ranch house door had not left the same way. And the trail of blood indicated that the murderer had also been injured.

Despite the pain in his arms and legs, Van leaped from bed and hurried to the back porch where he sloshed water over his face to ease the stinging of his eyes. He had work to do and he had to act swiftly. Orebank had turned against him at the first chance, he remembered, because he had sympathized with the North during the war and because he had dared set himself up as their neighbor. Now Craig Sloan, the only friend he had left, was riding into Orebank with a dead man whose killing he could not explain. Perhaps the citizens would charge him with being a party to the crimes of which they had accused Van Falin. The prejudiced hate which they held for the people of the North would then be increased and it was this which Van had tried so hard to defeat since he had taken over his uncle's ranch.

Working with desperate haste, Van threw a saddle on a fresh horse from the skimpy corral and headed south toward Orebank. On the rolling knoll beyond the Rocking F boundary, Van pulled his horse to a halt for a moment and looked at the sky to judge the time. The stars in the west were still sparkling in the hazy ring left by the setting moon and the cowboy knew he had three or four hours in which to work before sunrise. An interval of misgiving crept into his thoughts as he sat there and a shiver of uneasiness went down his spine. It had been such a short time since he had barely escaped the call of death and now he was riding back to flirt with fate again. He wondered if the goal for which he was fighting was worth the price.

A snort from his pony made him conscious of other life on the vast prairie about him and his thoughts took a new course. All around him the grass grew to his pony's knees and farther off a grove of jackpines waved their needles in an endless salute to the straying breeze. There was only one thing wrong with the landscape, Van decided. The grass was giving its life to nothing and the jackpines were spreading a shading canopy over barren earth. Cattle was the missing factor. A land which was created for livestock whose earliest owners had fought and died that they might have land for their herds was now empty of all life except a man and a horse.

VAN clucked his mount into action and rode on, a new determination turning his eyes cold and his face into a hard mask. A single, nervous gesture from his restless mount had given the cowboy a new slant on the situation. It was not for himself that he was fighting; it was for the nation as a whole and for the ranchers in Orebank. The unjust charges against him were delaying the plans which they had originally mapped out. Not a step had been taken toward the solution of their greatest problem which was to rebuild their ranches. Thousands of people in the East were begging for more food and

more leather, the production of which had almost reached a halt during the war. Every second wasted by the men in Orebank increased the crisis which was facing the country. Van determined to put a stop to the underhanded tactics of someone in Orebank who was responsible for the turmoil which was now keeping the ranchers from their work.

The Rocking F needed stock and riders. Fences had to be repaired and water holes had to be cleaned. Van was eager to get busy at these tasks and he knew it was impossible to complete them as long as he was dodging the vigilante committee and hiding from a hangnoose. Before he could do these things the real instigator of all the trouble in Orebank would have to be found and dealt with.

Van gave the bronc its head for a moment and inspected the loads in the sixgun which Craig Sloan had given him. He snapped the cylinder back in place with deadly purpose, placed the gun loosely in the holster at a handy angle, and urged the horse to a faster pace. Van had spent enough time running. Now he was ready to take the offensive and, if necessary, do a little lead slinging in his own behalf. Before the sun set on a new day, he was going to have Orebank's traitor in jail—or ready for boothill!

It was comparatively quiet in Orebank when Van Falin rode cautiously into the shadows of the outermost building. At the cottonwood grove where Big Lafe Belkins and the ranchers had tried to hang him, Van ground-tied his horse and continued on foot. Only two buildings still showed lights and these were far apart. Walking on the balls of his feet to still the rattle of his spurs, the cowboy turned left a block before he reached the glowing windows of the Jingle Spur Saloon, sneaked through the alley behind the jail and came out in front of the bank.

Here he stopped a while and studied the street. A man stumbled out of the saloon far to his right and struggled aboard his waiting bronc. As he rode drunkenly out of town, Van drew back into the darkness until he was out of sight. A quick glance up either side of the street revealed it to be empty after that and Van hurried quietly across to the bank. Keeping close to the protecting walls, he edged around to the back door.

Sturdy steel bars made dark lines across the glass, rendering it impossible for a man to enter there. But Van had been inside enough to know that a single night latch secured it. Drawing his six-gun, he tapped the corner of the pane with the bone handle and listened breathlessly for an alarm as the glass crashed to the floor with a musical tinkle, leaving an opening large enough for his hand to pass through.

A moment later he reached inside, turned the latch and entered unchallenged. Van ran to Banker Hudson's desk and clawed through the books and records which Hudson never bothered to store in the safe. The cowboy worked with feverish haste, casting worried looks about him.

Every creak of the building made him jump. His nerves tingled with tenseness. If he was found here it would be the end for him. The ranchers would make sure of their next necktie party. Van was not interested in money; he had no intentions of robbing the safe. He was after something more valuable than double eagles. But, if caught, his motives would not be questioned. The fact that he was there would be enough.

Finally he found it. Van lay under a table on the floor and concealed his lighted match with his hat while he hastily scanned the record of deposits. Smiling with satisfaction, he replaced the book on the desk and crept out.

CHAPTER IV

EARLY MORNING SHOWDOWN

THIS time Van did not hide in the shadows. When he gained the boardwalk, he straightened to his full height and strode openly down the street. Halfway to the Jingle Spur Saloon, he drew his colt, twirled the cylinder to insure its working order and then continued.

Without slowing his stride, Van Falin breasted calmly through the batwings of the Jingle Spur Saloon and halted on the threshold, legs widespread.

Ames Finley and beardy, fat-faced Mort Farley, the barkeeper, were the only occupants. Mort Farley was washing glasses, Finley leaned against the end of the counter.

Finley straightened like a springboard when Van burst into the room. His left arm was still in a sling; but his right slid toward the pearl-handled gun riding low on his leg.

"We're—we're closed, Falin," Finley said at last.

"I ain't drinking, Ames," Van returned softly. "So you won't have to open up specially for me. I just want to talk to you."

Ames Finley looked worried. "For gosh sakes, Falin, you ain't got no time to talk. This whole town's looking for you. You'd better be riding—fast!"

Van walked closer to Finley, his bootheels loud in the silence. "I got all the time in the world, Ames," Van answered. "But I'm afraid you ain't."

"What do you mean?" Finley chuckled. "Nobody's chasing me."

Van's face colored suddenly as Finley's remark dug into him. "There'll be a new charge against me after tonight, Ames. I just broke into the bank. What I found there might interest you."

"If you want to cut me in so I'll pro-

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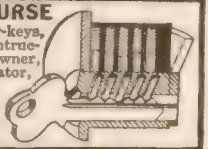

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tect you," Finley said, "I don't believe I'm interested."

The cowboy grinned coldly. "There's nothing to divvy except figures. Five thousand dollars marked beside your name the day after Lin Johnson disappeared. All your other deposits run around fifteen hundred and two thousand. I don't believe business was as good as that last week!"

Van Falin's words wiped the grin off Ames Finley's handsome face. The bartender also discerned the veiled accusation and as Finley reached for his colt, Mort Farley dived beneath the bar and came up with a shotgun..

Anticipating the results of his remark, Van Falin was faster than either of them. His colt was menacing the pair before their trigger fingers could coil. "I'd just as soon shoot it out as not," Van said grimly. "Do you want to drop 'em or . . ."

The clatter of their weapons against the floor made it unnecessary for him to finish the sentence. "Now, Finley, we'll walk over to the jail and have a little tongue-wagging session with Craig Sloan," Van instructed softly.

The dapper little saloonman's strained smile came back to his face. "Sure, Falin. I want to see just what you think you can hang on me."

He turned to the rack over the back mirror and reached for his hat and coat. Van moved forward to cover any tricky moves, his colt aimed at Finley's back. That move was the cowboy's mistake. Ames Finley reached for his hat. He grasped the Stetson's wide brim and yanked downward. Van knew it was a trap when he saw the wooden prong on the rack swing down like a lever. But it was too late to do anything about it. The floor under his feet disappeared and he sank through the opening.

VAN thumped against the bottom of an eight-foot cellar, his gun flying from his grasp with the shock. Even as he hit, the cowboy's eyes swept around the underground room. Lamps lined the sides of the cellar, outlining the cases of whisky and beer stored there. Then, in a far corner, Van saw larger and more bulky bundles. Cowhides! And even at that distance, the cowboy could see evidence of many different brands. The mark of the Rocking F was outlined on a hide covering the top of one of the bundles!

Fuming with rage, Van looked about for his gun. A voice behind him halted his reaching motion when he found it.

"Don't move, hombre. It won't be healthy."

Two men stepped from behind a row of crates, six-guns leveled. Van recognized one of them as the thick-chested, pock-marked ruffian who had ridden him down when he tried to escape the mob behind the jail.

"Ames allus said some gunny would be standing on that trap door one day shooting his mouth off. Lucky he sent us down here to get some wine." The pock-marked man turned to his partner, laughed gruffly. A door to the stairway behind him opened and Ames Finley entered, strutting like a bantam.

"Look who's talking now, Falin," he smirked at Van. "The tide's turned."

Van watched the saloonman grin, and matched it with one of his own. "The tide turns twice, Ames. Coming and going." Van gestured with his thumb toward the bundles of cowhides in the corner. "I reckon if Lafe Belkins would take a look down here, he'd know where all the stock in Orebank went."

"Why do you think I wanted to get back home before you fellows?" Finley asked boldly. "You don't think that bullet scratch on my leg was really enough to keep me out of the war?"

Motioning for his men to tie Van's hands, Ames Finley continued with his open confession—evidence that plans

for Van's death were already complete within his mind.

"You're so sure I killed the sheriff and Lin Johnson," Finley drawled sarcastically, "maybe you can tell me how I did it."

"Stop me if I'm wrong," Van snapped. "You kept me too busy defending myself to think for a while, Ames, but I've done a lot of it in the last few hours. Hooker's death wasn't in your plans at first. You called Lin Johnson down to rob him. He recognized you and shot you with my gun. Sheriff Hooker happened by and saw what happened. You shot him with your gun and left mine lying beside him after you'd busted Johnson's skull. Pinning it on me was the likely thing since I was none too popular here. The posse that was after me scared you into the line shack where I found you and you cooked up a story about masked riders shooting you."

A look of momentary fear passed over the saloonman's face when Van finished his story.

"Get him outside and on a horse," Finley ordered. "We're riding into the hills and moving the rest of those mixed cattle across the border before Big Lafe Belkins starts snooping around that way. A nice little stampede across the Rio will make it look like Falin was moving the herd and got caught in it. Let's go."

Strapped across a rolling, joggling bronc, Van went through a new hell during the trip across the plain and into the hills above Ames Finley's ranch. It felt as if he had been travelling for days when they finally called a halt. A look at the sun told him it was only noon.

When they removed him from the horse's back and tied him to a juniper tree, Van could look down into a little spoon-shaped gorge and see the herd of bawling milling cattle held there.

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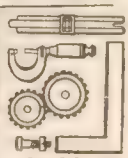

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Finley had done a thorough job. Stock from every ranch in Orebank was included in the herd.

Leaving the stoop-shouldered Zack to stand guard over their prisoner, Ames Finley and Tip side-stepped their broncs down the sloping wall of the gorge and rode down to greet the riders who were keeping check on the cattle. As Finley talked with his men below, Van saw them nod their heads and gesture toward the tree to which he was bound. At last Finley yelled to Zack to bring Van down to the outlaw's camp.

Van remained silent as the outlaw marched him to the floor of the gulley. It was halfway down the hill that the cowboy put his rapidly-formed plan into action. Van came to a sudden halt and Zack plowed roughly into his back, the sixgun ramming hard against his ribs. It was just what Van had hoped for. Before the gunman realized it was a trick, Van whirled and grabbed the man's gun arm. At the same time he threw his leg across Zack's path, gave the man a powerful tug which threw his feet from under him and tumbled him headfirst down the steep slope. Zack's fingers relaxed their grip on the sixgun and Van caught it in his own fist as the gunman fell.

Down below, Ames Finley sang out with a stream of curses and snapped a shot at the cowboy on the slope. Van leaped behind a stunted pine thicket as he felt the heat of Finley's bullet fan his cheek. Lead peppered into the brush and boulders about him like hail on a tin roof as the entire gang triggered fiercely in an attempt to smoke the cowboy from cover.

A SCREAMING slug ricocheted off a lava slab and slammed Van painfully to the ground as he sought a safer refuge. The bullet burned a deep crease along the point of the cowboy's jaw. Venturing a quick look above his new barricade to size up the crowd, another shot showered Van's eyes with rock dust, leaving him almost blinded.

Van saw that his escape began to look hopeless. Before many more minutes elapsed, the outlaws would begin working a circle around him. Outnumbered and outflanked, he wouldn't stand a chance of coming through alive.

From the corner of his eye, Van saw their first attempt at such tactics. Zack and Tip jumped into view on his left as they sought cover higher on the canyon wall. Van threw two hasty shots at the pair and grinned with satisfaction when the thin, stoop-shouldered hombre stumbled two steps farther and then plowed his head into the ground, blood spurting from a hole in his side. His tall, big-shouldered partner, Tip, retreated back to the protection of the frightened cattle below.

Suddenly then Van had an idea. Putting his back against the ground, he shoved his feet against the boulder in front of him and pushed with all his strength. The rock moved slightly in its nest of soil, making a sucking noise as it tore loose from the earth. He rested a moment and then tried again, moving the boulder forward another inch.

He braced, prepared to use his utmost strength. Suddenly his right leg grew weak. A hot searing pain ran through his thigh as one of Ames Finley's slugs found its mark.

Van knew it was now or never. Gritting his teeth against the throbbing ache in his thigh, he set his legs against the rock and heaved with all his might. Then the pressure relaxed as the stone gave way and crashed down toward the floor of the canyon taking with it all the smaller shrubs and rocks which stood in its path. Van struggled weakly to a sitting posture which enabled him to watch the rock take a final leap into the air and then roar down into the outlaws' camp.

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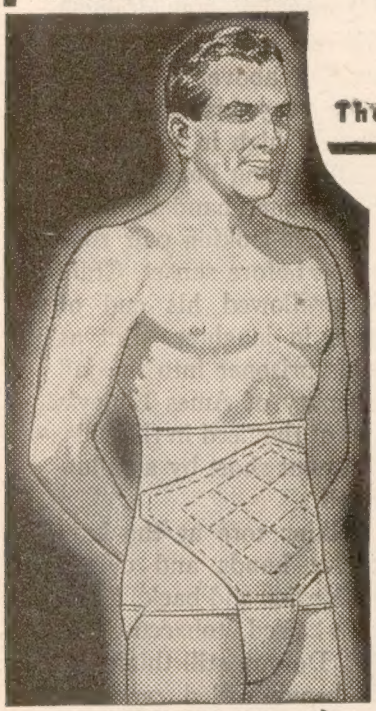

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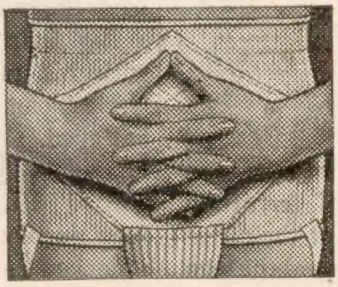

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The cattle were wild in an instant, a tumbling, running mass of terrorized animals. Yells of terror rent the air as the bedlam increased below and the men fled rapidly in an attempt to escape the onslaught of the cutting hoofs and crushing bodies. Some of them went down; others found cover. But Van had lost interest in them. He was looking for only one man.

A wild-eyed steer tore along the edge of the herd, his horns swinging from side to side in torment. It was then that Van sighted his prey. The steer caught Ames Finley on the point of the razor-sharp horns and cast him aside like a fly. The white-faced saloonman still had strength left to crawl into the brush and escape the death that was close behind.

It was there that Van found him after the frightened herd had escaped to the open prairie. He was no longer the cocky, neatly clothed businessman. His face was matted with sweat and dust and blood; his broadcloth suit was torn to shreds and his fine white hat was missing from his tangled hair.

WITHOUT speaking, Van dragged him to his feet and forced him to the broncs waiting above the gulley. And as they rode away this time, it was Van Falin who sat high in the saddle while Ames Finley hung limply across the bronc behind, bound hand and foot.

When the strange-looking pair rode into Orebank just before sunset, Craig Sloan almost swallowed his cud of chewing tobacco in laughter. But as Van hearded his prisoner into the jail and told the deputy of Ames Finley's confessions and of the herd in the hills, their revelry was cut short by a bellow from the rear cell.

Big Lafe Belkins tore at the bars with his massive hands and cursed Craig Sloan to Mexico and back. "You bat-eyed, skunk-haired, tobacco-chewing sidewinder. Do you still think I'm guilty?" The heavy-jowled rancher's face purpled with rage as the deputy unlocked the door. Craig Sloan cowered aside as Big Lafe stomped into the office.

Van started to move out of the doorway to let Belkins pass. But Big Lafe's coarse hand on his shoulder stopped him. "Well, Falin," he beamed, "I thought that iron-jawed Sloan would never let me at you. Let me be the first to shake yore hand." He grasped the cowboy's hand in a firm grip for a moment and then strode outside, a wide smile on his flat face.

For the first time in many months, Van remembered how he had felt when General Ulysses S. Grant had cited him for his conduct in action at Gettysburg. Shaking Big Lafe's hand made him feel the same way.

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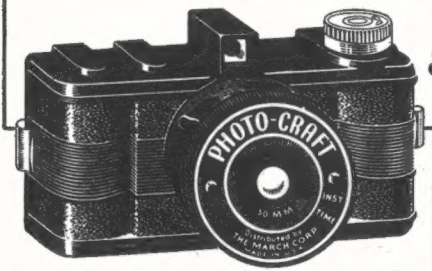

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Yes, if you don't feel that Photocraft is everything you expected, you may return it in 10 days for a complete refund.

IMPERIAL INDUSTRIES—Dept. PC288
618 South Dearborn St., Chicago 5, Ill.

Rush my Photocraft Candid Camera Outfit at $3.98 with Personalized Carrying Case and 3 rolls of No. 127 Film. My money will be refunded if returned in 10 days.

Name Wanted in Gold _____
Please Print

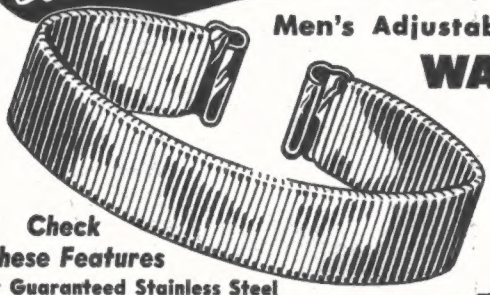
CHECK ONE

☐ I'm enclosing $3.98 in full payment. Please send my Photocraft Outfit Postpaid.
☐ Send my Photocraft C.O.D. I am enclosing $1.00 deposit because I want my Carrying Case Personalized in GOLD. I'll pay postman balance of $2.98 plus postage.
☐ Send my Photocraft C.O.D. without name on Carrying Case. I will pay postman $3.98 plus postage.

Name _____
Please Print Clearly
Address _____
City _____ Zone _____ State _____

"It's The Best Band in The Land"

The New and Better
BANDMASTER
Men's Adjustable, Expansion Stainless Steel
WATCH BAND $2
TAX FREE POST PAID



Check These Features

★ Guaranteed Stainless Steel
★ Will not Tarnish or Rust
★ Super-Flexible — Adjustable
★ Fits Any Watch — Any Wrist

Bandmaster Makes Any Watch Look Good . . . and Good Watches Look Better!

Yes, Bandmaster, at its truly *low* affordable price is the expensive looking, expensive performing, *tarnish-proof* watch band the world has been waiting for! So *flexible*, so *lightweight*, so *everlastingly smart!* End bothersome buckle-fussing with shabby, quick-aging leather bands. Order your *easy-on, easy-off* Bandmaster today.

RUSH COUPON

GENERAL SALES SUPPLY—Dept. B117
608 So. Dearborn St.—Chicago 5, Ill.

Please rush Bandmaster Expansion Watch Bands checked off below. If not delighted I may return within 5 days for refund.

CHECK ONE

Stainless Steel . . . ☐ 1 for $2 ☐ 2 for $3.50 ☐ 3 for $5
Gold Plated . . . . ☐ 1 for $3 ☐ 2 for $5.50 ☐ 3 for $8

☐ I am enclosing $_____ payment in full
☐ Ship C.O.D. I will pay postman $_____ plus postage.

Name _____
Please Print Clearly
Address _____
City _____ Zone _____ State _____

De Luxe 18-Kt. Gold Plated BANDMASTER WATCH BAND

WITH STAINLESS STEEL BACK, WARRANTED TARNISH-PROOF

$3 POST PAID TAX FREE

DON'T RISK PAYING
HOSPITAL AND DOCTOR BILLS
ALL BY YOURSELF!

HOSPITALIZATION Insurance PLAN

COVERS SICKNESS or ACCIDENT

● Do you know that an average of one person out of every ten becomes a hospital patient each year? More than 35,000 patients enter hospitals daily. You, or one of your family might be next! Don't go into debt or bankrupt your savings when Sickness or Accident strikes. Protect yourself NOW!

PAYS BENEFITS FOR ONE DAY OR MORE

This dependable Hospitalization Insurance Plan PAYS BENEFITS FOR ONE DAY OR MORE of Hospitalization for as long as 90 days for ACCIDENT and 90 days for SICKNESS in any policy year.

PAYS FOR LOSS OF INCOME DUE TO ACCIDENT

In addition to Hospital and Doctor Benefits, employed persons receive a CASH BENEFIT for LOSS OF TIME from work, while in Hospital due to accident disability, of $25 for each full week up to a total of $300.00 as provided in this liberal Policy.

ISSUED TO INDIVIDUALS or FAMILIES

You or members of your family may be protected against Hospitalization resulting from Sickness or Accident. Everyone, in good health, from 3 months to 70 years of age can apply for policy. Benefits reduced after age 60. Policy pays half benefits for Children under 18 and cost is reduced to half of the Adult premium rate.

CHOOSE YOUR OWN HOSPITAL and DOCTOR

Any lawfully operated Hospital and any Physician or Surgeon may be selected by you. You are not required to enter any particular Hospital under this liberal Hospitalization Plan.

FREE INFORMATION—NO OBLIGATION

NO RED TAPE! Send no money — just mail the coupon. We will mail you complete details and 10 day SPECIAL Inspection offer.

GEORGE ROGERS CLARK MUTUAL CASUALTY COMPANY

3890 Insurance Exchange Bldg. ● Rockford, Illinois

MAIL COUPON NOW

COSTS ABOUT **3¢** A DAY FOR ADULTS **1½¢** A DAY FOR CHILDREN (Half Adult Benefits)

POLICY PAYS UP TO

$6.00 EACH DAY **HOSPITAL** **$1080.00**

Pays actual expense for Hospital up to a Maximum Benefit of $6.00 a day for Room, Board, General Nursing for each insured adult. Includes up to 90 days per policy year for Accident and up to 90 days per policy year for Sickness.

$25 EACH FULL WEEK **LOSS of TIME** **$300**

Due to Accident for Employed Persons, up to 12 weeks.

$3 PER VISIT **DOCTOR BILLS** **$135.00**

Maximum benefit for attendance by a Doctor up to 45 visits, while in Hospital due to injuries.

$1000.00

ACCIDENTAL LOSS OF LIFE OR BOTH EYES, HANDS OR FEET

Many other liberal benefits.

ALL INDEMNITY SUBJECT TO LIMITATIONS AND EXCLUSIONS CONTAINED IN THE POLICY

George Rogers Clark Mutual Casualty Company
3890 Insurance Exchange Bldg., Rockford, Illinois

Please mail FREE information about Hospitalization Insurance Plan Policy.

NAME.....

ADDRESS.....

CITY & STATE..... (Zone, if any)

Fill in coupon. Clip and paste to Postal Card or mail in envelope.